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## KNOWING THIS, GUARD YOURSELF!

1 John 5:18-21

By

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June 18, 2006

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June 18, 2006  
1 John Lesson 25

## Knowing This, Guard Yourself! 1 John 5:18-21

Although I have not studied it since my high school days, I enjoyed studying geometry. It fascinated me how you could prove theorems based on certain axioms. If those axioms were true, the rest followed in logical, step-by-step fashion. You could conclude something with certainty based on the truth of the axioms.

Throughout First John, the apostle has been concerned about what we as Christians can know for certain. He began the letter with the certainty of his firsthand, eyewitness testimony of Jesus Christ (1:1-4). In 2:3, he wrote, "By this we *know* that we have come to *know* Him, if we keep His commandments." He writes to the fathers, because they *know* Him who has been from the beginning (2:13). He writes to the children, because they *know* the Father (2:14). He says (3:14), "We *know* that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren." In my English concordance, I counted 36 instances of the word *know* in First John.

As he concludes the letter, John drives home this theme. He sums up his purpose (5:13), "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may *know* that you have eternal life." In 5:15, "And if we *know* that He hears us in whatever we ask, we *know* that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." Now, in the final section, three times again he uses this word, at the beginning of verses 18, 19, 20: "We *know*... we *know*... we *know*..." John wants us to be certain about these important truths. He is still countering the false teachers and their destructive claims of secret knowledge.

Verses 18, 19, and 20 are in one sense just a review of what has already been said. You tend to read these verses and think, "Got it! Got it! Got it!" You think that you've passed the course, that you've got the material down just fine.

Then John throws a final fastball right by us (5:21): "Little children, guard yourselves from idols." You stand there flat-footed, thinking, "Where did that come from?" He hasn't been saying

anything about idolatry. He hasn't mentioned it in the entire book. So, at first glance, it seems out of context. But as you think about it, it sums up his entire message. Idolatry is making up your own god as a substitute for the one true God, who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. The false teachers were doing just that. They were offering a false god of speculation, not the one true God of revelation. So John's final words are a warning against adopting the errors of man-made religion. We can sum up his message in 5:18-21:

Because of what we know about our relationship with God,  
we must guard ourselves from idols.

John says that we know three things:

1. We know that no one who is born of God lives in sin (5:18).

John has just explained (5:17) that while all unrighteousness is sin, there is a sin not leading to death. But he does not want his little children to mistakenly think that it's normal for true children of God to live in sin. So he restates the same point that he made in 3:4-10, "that no one who is born of God sins." *Sins* is in the present tense, which allows for the sense of "continually sin." Since John has clearly said that believers do sin (1:8, 10; 2:1; 5:16), he must mean here that no genuine child of God lives in a state of sin.

In 3:9, John based his assertion that those born of God could not sin on the fact that God's seed abides in them. The new birth provides a new nature from God, which cannot sin. Some contend that while the *new nature* cannot sin, because believers also have the old nature, born again people may live no differently than unbelievers do. In other words, they say that saving faith does not necessarily result in a righteous life.

But that is exactly what the Gnostics in John's day claimed. They drew a distinction between the material body and the spirit. If you confronted them with frequenting prostitutes, they would have claimed, "That was just my body; my spirit is not tainted by that, it is pure!" John is saying, "That is nonsense!" He says (3:7-8a), "Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil." You can normally tell by looking at a man whether he is a child of God or not.

So, both in chapter 3 and in our text, John is saying that the new birth has an obvious result, namely, a righteous life. While true believers do fall into sin, they cannot live in it indefinitely. The changed nature results in changed behavior. If a pig falls into a mud hole, he wallows in it and doesn't try to get out, because that is its nature. But if a sheep falls in a mud hole, it wants to get out, get cleaned up, and avoid that hole in the future, because it has a different nature. So it is with a true child of God.

In 5:18, John gives as the reason that no one born of God sins that "He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him." The New KJV, following a textual variant, translates, "he who has been born of God keeps himself, . . . ." While the New Testament does talk about the believer keeping himself (2 Tim. 5:22; James 1:27; Jude 21; see also, 1 John 3:3; 5:21), here John seems to be focusing on Christ as the one who keeps us from Satan's clutches. Although the reference to Jesus as "He who was born of God" is unique, John probably wanted us to identify with our sympathetic Savior, who shares our humanity and yet who kept Himself from all sin (Heb. 2:17; 4:15).

When John says that "the evil one does not touch him," he does not mean that we are completely isolated from Satan's assaults. The enemy can tempt us and sift us like wheat (Luke 22:31) with God's permission. But he cannot lay hold of us to make us captives of sin for the rest of our lives. We may fall into his evil clutches and end up in Doubting Castle, as Bunyan's pilgrims did, but we have the key to escape and get back on the path to the Celestial City. John says that we *know* that no one born of God continues in sin. But in light of the false teaching that true Christians can live apart from the lordship of Christ, I wonder if we really do know this today! Then John gives a second certainty:

2. We know that we are of God, in contrast to the world that lies in the power of the evil one (5:19).

This is a restatement of 2:15, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Throughout the letter, John has drawn a sharp line between believers and the world (3:1, 13; 4:4, 5; 5:4, 5). He does not allow for a middle category, of true believers who keep one foot in the world. Either you are "of God" and separate from

this evil world, or you are of the world and you lie in the arms of the evil one.

John described the world (2:16) by the three phrases, “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life,” and said that such things “are not from the Father.” Believers must not live to gratify the flesh or to pursue the outward, material things that consume the world’s fancy. Life is short and hangs by a thread. To take pride in this life or in this evil world is to trust in what will soon perish. Only that which is eternal is worth pursuing.

In 5:19, John describes the whole world as lying in the power (or arms) of the evil one. The picture is not of frantic captives, desperately trying to escape this depraved tyrant. Rather, they lie quietly in his evil clutches, oblivious to their tragic plight. The god of this world has blinded their minds (2 Cor. 4:4). They can wear “Life is Good” T-shirts, oblivious that they are wandering perilously close to the edge of the abyss. They don’t realize that “in due time their foot will slip” (Deut. 32:35) and they will face God in judgment. Rather, they are sleeping peacefully in the arms of the evil one who will destroy them!

In contrast to the world, believers are “of God.” This means that Christ “gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). Or, as Paul also wrote (Col. 1:13-14), “For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” We now belong to and serve a new Master. He gave us new life, so that in every sense, we are “of God.” So our lives should be God-centered and God-focused. We should be taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

John says that we *know* this. But in light of many recent surveys, which show that there is no discernible difference in morals or values between those claiming to be born again and the population at large, it is not out of line to ask, “*Do you know this?*” Is there a fundamental difference between your priorities and goals and those of your non-Christian neighbors? Are you living for God and His glory and kingdom, or do you just attend church services a little more often than the rest of the population? It is axiomatic: “We

know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (5:19). Then John adds a third certainty:

3. We know that the Son of God has come and given us understanding to know the true God (5:20).

John's third affirmation is, "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." "And" is literally a mild adversative particle, contrasting the blind indifference of the world (5:19) with the new understanding of the believer.

There is a progression of thought here. First, Jesus came and John and his fellow apostles had to recognize Him as the Son of God. That was a title of deity. For example, Jesus said (Luke 10:21-22), "I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Jesus there claims a unique relationship with the Father that all others lack. Only He can reveal the Father to us, according to His sovereign will. If Jesus doesn't reveal the Father, we cannot know Him.

In John 5:17-18, Jesus claimed that God is His Father, which the Jews understood as blasphemy, because he was making Himself equal with God. Rather than denying their charges, Jesus went on to state some of the strongest affirmations of His deity in all of Scripture. He claimed to have the power to give life to whom He wishes, to judge everyone, and to receive the same honor as the Father (John 5:21-23). He claimed that the day is coming when those in the tombs would hear His voice and come forth, either to a resurrection of life or of judgment (John 5:28-29). John and his fellow apostles recognized Jesus as the Son of God, because He had opened their eyes. This points to the historical foundation of the Christian faith.

Not only did they know "that the Son of God has come," but also, He "has given us understanding, so that we may know Him

who is true." Without this supernatural gift of understanding, we cannot know God. As Paul writes (1 Cor. 2:14), "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." This divine gift of understanding brings us into a personal relationship with the only true God, so that we come to know Him. Here John uses a different word for *know*, which means, to know experientially. There is a great difference between knowing *about* someone and actually *knowing* the person himself. Through the understanding that Christ gives, we come personally to "know Him who is true." The word "true" means "genuine" or "authentic." He is the only genuine God; all others are fakes or impostors.

Then John adds, "we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ." This refers to the abiding relationship that John has spoken of so often. We dwell in God through Jesus Christ. The close mention of Jesus with God also shows the deity of Christ.

John also adds, "This is the true God and eternal life." The phrase calls to mind Jesus' words (John 17:3), "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." Eternal life is to know personally the only true God through His Son. If you don't know Him, you do not have eternal life.

Conservative scholars are divided over whether the last phrase, "This is the true God," refers to the Father or to Jesus. John Stott and James Boice follow B. F. Westcott in arguing that "This" refers to "Him who is true," in which case all three uses of *true* refer to the Father. But, many early church fathers, as well as the Reformers, argued that the phrase refers to the closest antecedent, namely, to Jesus Christ. If so, this is one of the strongest direct statements of the deity of Christ in the New Testament. In light of John's polemic against the false teachers, who denied Jesus' deity, it would seem fitting at the end of the book to refer to Jesus as "the only true God and eternal life." Either way, it is obvious that the close and unique relationship between Jesus and the Father could not be shared by any mere man. As John earlier stated (2:23), "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also."

Thus John states three axioms, three things that true believers know with certainty: (1) No one who is born of God lives in sin. (2) We are of God, in contrast to the world that lies in Satan's power. (3) The Son of God has come and has given us understanding to know the true God. Then, without warning, John throws his fastball:

4. As God's little children, we must guard ourselves from idols (5:21).

As I said, at first glance, verse 21 seems out of context. But in verse 20 John has just mentioned the true God. This undoubtedly brought to his mind the false god of the heretics. They denied the God of the Bible. They said that "the Christ" came upon the man Jesus at His baptism and left just prior to His crucifixion. But they did not believe that He is eternal God in human flesh. In light of their false god, it is natural for John to warn his little children to guard themselves from idols.

We may think that this warning had a special application in Ephesus, where John sent this letter. The Temple of Diana (or Artemis) was there and the silversmiths made a good living making statues of this pagan goddess (Acts 19:23-41). If you travel today in the Far East or in primitive tribal areas, you see many shrines to idols. But Americans, it would seem, do not have a problem with bowing down before statues of imagined gods.

But that is not the case. Even here in Flagstaff, there is an entire store downtown that is devoted to selling idols. I don't mean to be offensive, but go into any Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox church and you will see people praying to statues or icons, which is idolatry, even if it is a representation of Jesus. Our Lord made it clear (John 4:24), "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." Any form of bowing before pictures or statues of Jesus or the saints is a violation of biblical worship.

Invariably, idolaters make up their own gods to suit their desires and preferences. They do not submit to the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ through the Bible. Our local paper just ran an article about a church in town that is celebrating its one hundredth birthday. The pastor said that the church "has a heart for the compassion of Jesus Christ, as well as for the justice for

which he stood. We strive to be an open and inclusive congregation, welcoming everyone equally and without judgment." The article made it clear that this means welcoming those of every sexual orientation and theological perspective. That church is worshipping a "Jesus" of their own imagination and liking, not the Jesus revealed in the Bible, which is idolatry.

In the most basic sense, an idol is anything that takes the rightful place of God in your life. Paul equated covetousness or greed with idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). Your career, your pursuit of money, your possessions, excessive devotion to leisure and recreation, or even putting a human relationship ahead of your relationship with God, may all become idols. Putting your intellect above God's revelation is idolatry. Watching hours of inane or immoral TV shows each week or spending hours playing computer games, while not having time to spend with God or serve Him, is idolatry.

At the root of all of these is the idol of self. The idolater has not yielded the throne of his life to the true God. Rather, he wants his will and his way, and he tries to use God to get what he wants. If his god delivers, he sets the god back on the shelf until the next time he needs something and then uses it again. If it doesn't deliver, he'll shop around for a better god who gets him what he wants. But the idolater does not submit to the living and true God. I fear that even many who claim to be born again Christians are only trying to use God to get happiness or peace or a better life. If He brings trials, they look for a new god. That is idolatry!

John tells us to "guard" ourselves from idols, which implies that we have something valuable that the enemy is trying to steal. Spurgeon points out that if a man has a box and he's not sure what's in it, he won't be very careful about guarding it. But if he knows that it contains a rare and valuable treasure, he will be diligent to guard it carefully. John is saying that if you know the true God and His Son Jesus Christ, you have a treasure. Guard it so that you don't drift into one of the many forms of idolatry.

### Conclusion

A *Newsweek* article many years ago (1/31/1983) told about how treasure hunters looking to make a huge profit were stealing rare idols from the Hopi reservation. The worst theft happened in

1978, when looters took four ancient stick figures representing the most sacred deities of the Hopi religion. "Without the idols, there could be no Hopi rituals," the article stated, "and without the rituals, the tribe's spiritual life was in danger of extinction." A tribal leader explained that these ceremonies "bring blessings in rainfall, bountiful crops, good health, long life. That is being lost to us." What a sad description of idolatry! You make up your own gods and then use them to get what you want. The problem is, these gods may be stolen and your way of life is destroyed. If it can be taken from you, it isn't the true God!

Make sure that even if you claim to follow Him as a born again Christian, you don't fall into the idolatry of using Him to get what you want, or accepting the parts of Him that you like and rejecting the parts you don't like. That is no different than pagan idolatry. "Little children" implies that we are vulnerable and weak. Guard yourselves from idols!

### Application Questions

1. Why is it axiomatic that true believers do not live in sin? Should we give assurance of salvation to a person who claims to be born again, but who refuses to repent of known sin?
2. Why is it axiomatic that true believers are distinct from the world? What should this look like? Is monasticism the answer?
3. Why is it axiomatic that the Son of God must give us understanding to know the true God? How does this apply to those who claim that anyone can believe if he chooses to do so?
4. Where are you most tempted to idolatry? How can you guard yourself against it?

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