

## 1 John 5. 18-20. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 12 June 2010.

Our reading for this morning comes from the closing section of the First Epistle of John, commencing at chapter 5 verse 18.

*We know that everyone who has been begotten of God does not sin, but He who was begotten of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.*

*We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the evil one.*

*And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true; and we are in Him that is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.*

*Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*

In the closing section of his epistle, John reminds his readers of three basic truths which they have held from the beginning – of three triumphant certainties of their faith. Verses 18, 19 and 20 each begin with the resounding note of confidence ... ‘we know’. Here is true knowledge, the birthright of the lowliest Christian, and standing in obvious contrast to the boasted yet spurious ‘knowledge’ of the false teachers.<sup>1</sup>

First, ‘We know that every one who has been begotten of God does not sin’ – where the tense which John uses<sup>2</sup> gives the meaning ‘does not go on sinning – does not continue in sin’. In these words, John summarises what he had taught in more detail at the beginning of chapter 3, especially in verse 9; namely, that anybody who goes on living in an unbroken pattern of sin and unrighteousness shows thereby that he or she has never experienced the transforming power of the new birth and does not belong to the family of God.

Back in his first chapter, John had made it clear that if any one (including a true Christian) claims to have reached a point where he never sins – that is, claims to live a life altogether free from any and all sinful actions – he makes God out to be a liar.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, John’s description of the Lord Jesus in chapter 2 as our ‘Advocate’ presupposes that believers do sin, for it is in Him as our ‘defence counsel’ that God has made full provision for the sinning Christian.

Yet, although sin still lives in the believer, the true believer does not live in sin!

Every true Christian – and John will allow no exception – ‘every one who has been begotten of God’ – though he or she may slip into sin – the true Christian lives at war with sin – and at war with *all* sins. The truth is that sin and God’s children cannot dwell together in harmony.

Holiness is a characteristic of everyone begotten of God. If the relationship with God is real, sin is abnormal – opposed to the believer’s nature.

We can hardly miss John’s double ‘begotten of God’. As I understand it, the second reference is to our Lord Jesus, whom John has spoken of several times as God’s only begotten.<sup>4</sup>

In our verse, the reason the Christian does not go on sinning is because the Lord Jesus keeps him.

The evil one – the malignant one – does not so much as ‘touch’ that person who is kept and preserved by the Lord Jesus.

But we should note that the word translated ‘touch’ here signifies ‘to lay hold on ... to hold fast ... to fasten one’s grip on’. The word is used, for example, in John 20 to describe how Mary Magdalene attempted to cling to her Risen Lord, and in the Greek Old Testament to describe those who presumed to ‘touch’ God’s people so as to harm them.<sup>5</sup> But, John assures us, the evil one will never succeed in laying hold on the least and weakest of God’s people, so as to snatch or pluck them out of the Saviour’s mighty hand and thereby to sever the vital connection between them and Him.<sup>6</sup>

It is true, of course, that believers are still tempted and assaulted regularly by the devil,<sup>7</sup> but he, Satan, can never so fasten his grip on them as to reclaim them to his kingdom. John wants us to know that, as was true during the days of His flesh,<sup>8</sup> our Lord is still able to ‘keep’ His own.

Thank God, I am therefore not dependent only on my own strength or vigilance. For, although I have a strong foe, I have an even stronger Friend!<sup>9</sup>

Augustus Toplady expressed the Christian’s confidence well in one of his better known hymns ... ‘A sovereign Protector I have, unseen, yet for ever at hand’.

John's second 'we know' closes in from the general statement 'we know that everyone' to the more personal 'we know that we'.

'We know that we are of God' ... knowing this no doubt they had applied the tests he had outlined in his epistle – moral,<sup>10</sup> social<sup>11</sup> and doctrinal<sup>12</sup> – and their lives displayed the evidences and characteristic marks of the new birth, by which they had the assurance that they possessed eternal life.<sup>13</sup>

In saying, 'We know that we are of God', John meant among other things, 'We know that we are born of God' – God alone is the source of our life.

And here again he takes us back to the opening section of chapter 3, repeating in effect the breathtaking thought he expressed there, 'Beloved, now we are children of God'.<sup>14</sup>

And John knew that, in reality, the whole of mankind falls into one of only two realms, that which belongs to God or that which belongs to the evil one.

And, whereas we are of God, all others – 'the world, the whole of it' literally – 'lies in the evil one' - lies, that is, in his domain, in his grip, within his sphere of influence.

It follows that, because we as Christians 'are of God', we are, as our Lord explicitly said on more than one occasion, 'not of the world'.<sup>15</sup> Though in the world, we are not part of it.

To be born of God is to be safe from the destructive power of the evil one. Not to be born of God is to be wholly under the power of the evil one.

Satan cannot lay hold on those begotten of God (because they are kept by Christ) and he does not need to lay hold on the world, for it lies quiet and content in his grasp<sup>16</sup> – putting up no struggle to free itself – helplessly under the control of the one who our Lord spoke of three times as 'the ruler of this world'.<sup>17</sup>

Paul reminded the Ephesians in the opening of chapter 2 of his letter that they had 'once walked according to ... the ruler of the authority of the air, the spirit now working in the sons of disobedience'.<sup>18</sup>

And, without knowing it, unbelievers are the devil's dupes and unsuspecting servants. We have only to think of the two days of Job chapter 1. First, verses 6 to 12 tell us that '*there was a day* when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them' – and that, following Satan's insolent challenge, the Lord said to him concerning Job, 'Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person'.

Then, secondly, verses 13 to 17 tell us that '*there was a day*' when 'a messenger came to Job and said, The oxen were ploughing and the donkeys feeding beside them, when the Sabeans raided them and took them away—indeed they have killed the servants with the edge of the sword' ... and another messenger 'came and said, The Chaldeans formed three bands, raided the camels and took them away, yes, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword'.

As far as both the Sabeans and the Chaldeans were concerned, of course, they were simply robber bands doing what came naturally to them – oblivious to the fact that they were the unwitting instruments of the Monarch of evil – that there was indeed an unseen and sinister hand directing their actions, as it were, from behind the curtain!

John's third 'we know' sets out the ground of the first two. 'We know that the Son of God has come' ... has 'come in the flesh', that is,<sup>19</sup> , and come, with a sideways glance at the false teachers, to experience, not only baptism, but death on a cross.<sup>20</sup>

And, having come, He 'has given us an understanding', that we might know God. Unlike the teaching of the heretics, the revelation He gave of the Father was not 'half-baked' – it was 'full-orbed'! And, not only has the Lord Jesus revealed the character and glories of God, but He has enlightened our minds that we might discern, appreciate and enjoy, not only knowing the truth about God, but knowing the only true – the only real and genuine – God Himself.<sup>21</sup>

But the Lord Jesus has not only made God known. For, through faith in Him, we His people dwell 'in' God – which means, at the very least, that we dwell in fellowship with Him.

If then the whole world can be said to lie 'in' the fearful embrace of 'the evil one', those begotten of God can be said to lie 'in' the loving embrace of the Father.<sup>22</sup>

And, John explains, we are 'in Him that is true' by virtue of – and only by virtue of – our being 'in His Son Jesus Christ'. For it is the Lord Jesus who has brought us into this intimate and abiding personal union with the only true God.

And then John adds, 'This is the true God and eternal life'. But to whom is John referring? Frankly, I'm not sure. I can see good arguments for understanding him to have in mind the Lord Jesus, who the apostle unquestionably knew to be truly God, and who he had closely linked with eternal life in the opening paragraph of this letter. But I can also see good arguments for understanding him to be speaking of 'Him that is true', namely, God the Father – in which case, I suppose we could just about say that the apostle wants us to view God, not only as 'light', as in chapter 1,<sup>23</sup> and as 'love', as in chapter 4,<sup>24</sup> but here in chapter 5 as 'life'.

But, as I say, I am in no position to be dogmatic. Nor am I particularly bothered, for both interpretations are true.

In many ways the last verse of the chapter – and, indeed, of the entire book – is startling. And that for two reasons.

First, that it *is* the last verse. For, unlike John's other epistles, this one concludes abruptly, with no formal farewell – any more than it began, as did they, with a conventional form of greeting. The nearest parallels found in the New Testament are the Epistle to the Hebrews (which enjoys a standard salutation at its end, but has no greeting at its beginning) and the Epistle of James (which commences with a full and formal greeting, but ends as abruptly as does this epistle).

I suspect that John intended his epistle to be circulated among several Christian communities in Asia Minor – churches with which he was acquainted, where he was well-known, and which were, he knew, under threat from a common form of false teaching. This would explain, not only the abrupt opening and close of his book, but also his expressions of endearment and affection for his readers – one of which ('little children') appears in this, his very last verse.

But I said that I find the last verse rather startling for two reasons. And the second is its subject matter; namely, a sharp warning against idolatry.

Not that, in itself, it is at all strange that the apostle should sound a warning to his readers against idols. For Christians of the first century were immersed in a pagan and idolatrous society. They were surrounded by idol worship in every form imaginable, and by idolatrous cults innumerable – and nowhere more than in Asia Minor. Indeed, I see no reason to doubt the unanimous testimony of the early Church Fathers that John lived out his later days at Ephesus. And if there was one thing for which Ephesus, the Metropolis of Asia, was more celebrated than any another in those days, it was for the magnificence of its idol worship. The Temple of Artemis (the Roman name for whom was 'Diana'), which crowned the head of its harbour, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. And we know from Acts 19, just how proud the citizens of Ephesus were of both Artemis and her Temple.

To that extent, it isn't at all remarkable that John should warn his readers to guard themselves against literal idols. What I do find somewhat surprising is that John's exhortation should come at the close of a book which has made no reference whatever to idols before ... not once in its previous 104 verses.

May John have had in mind, not so much literal idolatry – such as that of the worship of Artemis or Zeus or whoever – but rather the false conceptions of God which were being peddled by the false teachers against whom he had written so much and with such strong feeling? But would John's original readers have understood his words in such an unusual sense. I don't know.

But I do know two things. First, that in the closing two verses of his epistle, John has provided us with the last of his many striking contrasts. Earlier we have encountered, among others, contrasts between light and darkness, truth and error, love and hatred, Christ and antichrist, righteousness and sin, the children of God and of the devil, and between life and death. Here we see set over against 'the true God', all forms of false gods.

And the second thing I know is that we cannot restrict idolatry to the worship of images of stone, marble or gold. For anything – or anyone – other than God which occupies the supreme place in my heart and life is an idol.

And, like it or not, we have to face the fact that God demands our undivided loyalty.

I finish with a true incident I read about some time ago. At a conference between the Northern and Southern American States during the civil war of 1861-66, representatives of the South explained what concessions they were prepared to make by way of territory, provided that they could secure the independence of the rest. Larger and larger offers were made but each met with steadfast refusal. Finally, Abraham Lincoln placed his hand on that portion of the map which covered *all* the Southern states and delivered his ultimatum, 'Gentlemen', he said, 'this Government must have the whole'. He knew that the Constitution of the United States was at an end if any part, no matter how small, was allowed to be independent of the rest.

And such is the claim, my brothers and sisters, which God makes on all of us. He will not share His place with mammon ... with pleasure, sport, honour, fame or power ... or anything. His Government must have the whole!

'Little children', John wrote, 'keep yourselves from idols'.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, 1 John 2. 4.

<sup>2</sup> The present continuous tense.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 1. 10.

<sup>4</sup> The perfect tense, 'he that has been begotten', refers to the believer as one of God's children, in contrast to those who have not become so. The aorist or point tense, 'was begotten', refers to the Son of God, 'the only begotten from the Father', John 1. 14; 1 John 4. 9 etc, in contrast to the evil one. The unusual expression here is perhaps used to emphasise the intimate link between the Son and those He is not ashamed to call brethren.

<sup>5</sup> Psa. 105. 15 (Psa. 104. 15 in the Greek Old Testament); Zech. 2. 8.

<sup>6</sup> John 10. 28.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Pet. 5. 8 etc.

<sup>8</sup> John 17.12.

<sup>9</sup> 'Though the Christian has a great foe he has a greater Friend'. (Alfred Plummer on 1 John in the Pulpit Commentary.)

<sup>10</sup> 1 John 2. 29.

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 4. 7.

<sup>12</sup> 1 John 5. 1.

<sup>13</sup> 1 John 5. 13.

<sup>14</sup> 1 John 3. 1.

<sup>15</sup> John 15. 19; 17. 14, 16.

<sup>16</sup> "As the believer 'abides in Christ' so that he is ... fruitfully sustained by Him, so the world lies in the devil, by whom it is controlled and rendered helpless and powerless". TDNT, volume III, page 654, footnote 3.

<sup>17</sup> John 12. 31; 14. 30; 16. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Eph. 2. 2.

<sup>19</sup> 1 John 4. 2.

<sup>20</sup> 1 John 5. 6.

<sup>21</sup> And the tense John uses (the present tense).conveys the idea of a continuous process of getting to know Him.

<sup>22</sup> The Greek construction is the same as that applied to 'the evil one'.

<sup>23</sup> 1 John 1. 5.

<sup>24</sup> 1 John 4. 8, 16.