



Lesson 10 – Concluding Thoughts

1 John 5:13-21

Sometimes we forget that the letters of the New Testament are exactly that – letters. These letters come from the heart of a ministry leader to actual people who were loved very much. As we come to the end of 1 John, we get to listen in to the aged apostle sharing several more concerns that are on his heart with these Christians before signing off. This final section begins with 1 John 5:13, a summary statement of John's purpose that has often been recognized as in many ways the central verse in the book of 1 John. John then wraps us the letter with a few concluding remarks about issues such as prayer, sin, assurance, and identity. In many ways this is similar to the gospel of John, which also concludes with a clear summary statement (John 20:30-31) followed by an appendix of sorts (John 21).

Read 1 John 5:13-21. Why do you think John decided to address these issues at the end of the letter?

In what ways do these issues overlap with John's other writing in the gospel? In what ways are these new concerns?

In this lesson, we will briefly cover these last admonitions, and then take some time to step back and consider some of the larger themes of the book as a whole now that we have finished it.

John's Concluding Thoughts

As John begins wrapping up his letter, he hits on a few more important themes related to what he has been discussing all throughout. He returns to important topics like confidence/assurance, prayer, sin, and identity.

I. Confidence and prayer (5:13-15)

John wants believers to have confidence that they have eternal life. At least one important reason for this confidence is because John knows confidence in one's position before God will empower greater prayer. Those who question how God *really* feel about them will find themselves frustrated in their prayer lives. It's hard to pray to a God that you fear might be fundamentally opposed to you.

How should believers respond when they find themselves fearful in their prayer lives? How has John sought to build this confidence in the hearts of believers throughout the letter?

What are you confidently asking God for today?

II. Intercession and Sin (5:16-17)

John moves on from considering prayer generally to considering prayer for sinning believers specifically. John's focus on intercession ought to be convicting to us, as the first thing on John's heart after discussing the impressive blank check God offers us when we pray according to His will is the spiritual state of other Christians. John's focus throughout his letter on love for other Christians can be seen here in his prayer priorities. The first thing on his heart when he enters the prayer closet is concern for his fellow Christian's spiritual state.

While the general emphasis on prayer and sin is clear, some of John's statements here have puzzled commentators and students of God's Word. What exactly is "a sin unto death"? And what is the point of praying for only certain people who are in sin? Most importantly, what do we say to professing believers who fear that they are someone they love may have committed the sin unto death?

At the core of these issues is the question of what exactly the sin unto death is. Catholics have taken it upon themselves to define certain sins as "mortal" sins based on this passage, but the lists of sins that are mortal and those that are less serious do not show up in the letter of John or anywhere else in the New Testament for that matter. When we ask what exactly John means, we don't get a clear definition. It would appear that John's first audience knew what he was talking about, but such clarity has been lost to us today. There are several different interpretations of "the sin unto death":

- Some connect the "sin unto death" with the unpardonable sin of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (**Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-30; Luke 12:10**). This is an attractive option because these seem to be the only two places in the New Testament where certain sins are seen as beyond hope. However, the difficulty is that Mark in particular connects the sin of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit with seeing signs performed by Jesus and attributing them to Satan (Mark 3:30). Since we can no longer directly view the supernatural signs performed by Christ, this specific sin is probably not what John had in mind.

- **Some see the “sin unto death” as a sin that has already resulted in death.** In other words, John is saying that if someone has sinned in a grievous way that led to the Lord taking their life (cf 1 Corinthians 11:29-30) there is no use praying for them. While this is an attractive possibility, nothing else that we see in the Scriptures hints at praying on behalf of the dead, and without further clues from John that this was a problem this option is not ideal either.
- **Some understand the “sin unto death” as apostacy.** This probably makes the most sense when we consider John’s situation. He has been concerned with those who are teaching false doctrine and trying to get others in the Christian community to leave. On this view, those who have abandoned the faith and rejected the gospel are not under the same guarantee that the “brother” of verse 16 is. John does not forbid praying for anyone, he simply clarifies that his strong promise of God’s restoration does not apply to those who have rejected the gospel and have gone after false teaching.

What then would you say to someone who is afraid that they have committed “a sin unto death”?

How should we then think about people who have apostatized from the Christian faith? Should we pray for them? Is there any hope?

John is not writing anyone off as hopeless here. He is simply acknowledging that those who have rejected the gospel have hardened themselves to God’s love and light and life.

While people have and do come back from such a position, this is rare and should be a warning to all who take lightly the free gift of God.

How can we better seek to pray for the spiritual strength and success of our brothers and sisters in Christ as John challenges us to here?

III. Knowledge and Identity (5:18-20)

Verses 18, 19, and 20 all begin with the same opening “we know.” All three times, the phrase “we know” is tied to some aspect of our identity as Christians. As John approaches the conclusion of this book, he wants the Christians he wants to make sure the Christians he is writing to have certain bedrock truths nailed down in their heart. All three of these truths relate to our identity in Christ, who we are now that we have been saved.

How would you summarize each of these truths?

Why do you think it was so important for John to conclude with these statements about our identity in Christ?

IV. The Danger of Idolatry (5:21)

This final statement is surprisingly abrupt. There is debate as to what exactly John is talking about here. Some argue that, writing in a Roman context, he is genuinely concerned that his readers stay away from worshipping small statues.¹

¹ Idolatry was quite pervasive in the ancient world. Many social events were held in idol temples, and eating food sacrificed to idols was a common practice. In such an environment, keeping free from idolatry was much harder and more costly than simply not bowing down to an idol.

Others find it a strange way to end the letter and so look for an understanding that fits more with the theme of 1 John. Further complicating the problem is the reality that John has nowhere else in his letter mentioned idolatry, and the theme doesn't show up in his other letters or his gospel.² Since John is addressing the problem of worldliness throughout his letter, and since idolatry and worldliness are often connected, it is probably best to see this as a broad concern about believers allowing their heart to be pulled away from God.

The New Testament ties together the world, out of control desires, and idolatry on several occasions. Paul warns that covetousness is idolatry on two separate occasions (Colossians 3:5, Ephesians 5:5). Having out of control desires is connected with adultery by James (James 4:1-4). John has likewise connected what we desire with following the world (1 John 2:15-18). In many ways, this battle between living for God and following our own selfish desires to bring us comfort, pleasure, and happiness parallels the ancient practice of looking to the creation to worship stone statutes.

In what ways do worshipping idols and living for pleasure in modern America line up with each other? In what ways are they different?

Why do you think John decided to end with this statement?

² Idolatry is a theme in the book of Revelation, however. Here actual idolatry seems to be in mind (Revelation 2:14, 20; 9:20; 21:8; 22:15).

Review of 1 John

Having gone through the entire letter, we will take some time at the end to review some of the major themes that run throughout the letter. John uses much repetitive language, and our summary could easily be lengthened by several other themes that John considers. For time's sake, however, we will only review five.

I. Fiercely hold onto the right teaching.

A major reason for John's writing appears to be his concern for the doctrinal purity of the church. To borrow language from Paul, "grievous wolves" (cf Acts 20:29) had entered the flock, or rather had departed from the flock and were trying to bring believers with them (1 John 2:19). Throughout the letter, John is constantly giving examples of wrong teaching and then correcting it:

- You can't say that you have a relationship with God and walk in darkness (1:6)
- You can't claim to be sinlessly perfect (1:8, 10)
- You can't claim to be of the truth and deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:21-23)
- You can't claim to be a Christian and live in unrepentant sin (3:7-9)
- You can't claim to speak in the Spirit and deny cardinal truths about Jesus' identity (4:1-3)

Many Christians were apparently being confused by the lies of Satan, the world, and false teachers. In response, John points his readers back every time to core orthodox truth that he as an apostle had taught them. The way to overcome the lies is with the truth, and for this reason Christians need to know what God's Word says.

What do you think are the most important lies facing the church today? What does God's Word have to say to these lies?

II. Completely believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The wrong teaching that John was combating appears to at its core get Jesus wrong. Although we can't be sure exactly what was being taught, it appears that some were denying the divinity of Jesus (1 John 5:5), or the humanity of Jesus (1 John 4:2), or the status of Jesus as the Messiah (1 John 2:22; 5:1).

In what ways does Satan try to minimize the importance of Jesus for salvation or shake our confidence in Christ's work?

How can believers be prepared for the false teaching that will come their way from the world and from false teachers?

III. Carefully obey the commands of God.

One problem John appears to be pushing back against is the idea that you can have a relationship with God and live how you want. This ignores the very character of God (1:5-6). Being born of God means living like God and keeping His commands, a position John reminds us of frequently (2:28-29; 3:6, 9-10; 5:18). Much like John's audience, we today find ourselves bombarded by those who argue that the new birth doesn't necessarily result in a changed life.

What are some ways that this type of teaching shows up? How do we as Christians respond to this dangerous teaching?

IV. Selflessly love your brothers and sisters.

What exactly does obedience to God's commands look like? God's Word gives us lots of commands about things we should not do and things we should do.

What are some examples of the commands of God for believers?

But John follows Jesus in boiling down the commands of God into an overarching command that summarizes all the others: Love God and love others (Matthew 22:35-40). Throughout his letter, John ties together the idea of obedience to God and love, especially love for other Christians (2:7-11).

In what ways do the above commands reflect the overarching command to love God and others?

V. Confidently know that you belong to God.

The book of 1 John has often been summarized with one word: assurance. Knowing that you belong to God and have been brought into a new life purchased by the propitiation of Christ is important in your spiritual walk. John uses that phrase "that you may know," "by this we know," and other similar expressions over and over in this letter. Again, the summary in 5:13 puts it succinctly, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life..."

What happens if believers are unsure of where they stand before God?

How does John seek to build within his readers an assurance of their salvation?

As we conclude this study, which of these major themes has been most impactful for you and why?