

## Confidence

1 John 5:13-21

October 24, 2010

We have come to the end of John's letter. He has written to the church to love one another. He has written to warn them against false teachers. He has written to encourage them to live out the love of God in their lives. Now, he has come to the end of the letter and is wrapping things up.

Now that he has arrived at the end he tells us again for whom the letter is intended and why he has written it. First, John says, "*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God.*" (v.13) This **message** is only for those who believe in the name of the Son of God. This is one of the problems we have in a society that has been informed and guided by the church for generations, but is not Christian. Our culture thinks it knows God and Christianity, but it doesn't. G.K. Chesterton stated, "It's not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, it's that it has been found difficult and left untried." The people around us, and even in the church, insist on remaking God in their image, they want a God who is obedient to them, who has as His highest goal to meet their needs, and they want to accept all His promises as being made to them, but they refuse to do what He asks of them. It really is like petulant children complaining that their parents won't let them run the house. I've got news for you. The children aren't supposed to be in charge. Neither are we.

This letter, all of its instructions, and all of its promises, are only for those who are in Christ. They

only work for people who believe in the name of the Son of God. In one way, this makes a lot of sense. It makes sense that only the people who know God and are living in His love can share it with each other. It makes sense that only people who are in God's family will be treated like His children.

This is to whom the letter is written. So, why was it written? ". . . *so that you may know that you have eternal life.*" (v.13) John doesn't write to the people who believe in the name of the Son of God so that they may think they have eternal life, or that they may hope that they have God's presence now and a place in heaven when they die. John writes so that they may know it. This is **confidence**. He is trying to instill confidence in those who belong to God that they do, in fact, belong to God and have God's presence now and forever as a result.

Because those who belong to God are in Him, and He in them, we can have confidence as we come to Him. John addresses this in verses 14 and 15: "*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.*" We are His beloved children, chosen by Him to bear His name. Because He loves us we know that He hears us. We already have His attention. We are not like the prophets of Baal who had to cut themselves in order to draw their god's notice. We are not like the Norsemen who had to perform acts of bravery and valor to win their gods' approval. We are not like the animists who have to give offerings to the trees and animals in order to assuage the anger of the

spirits they have to offend to survive. We are the chosen beneficiaries of a loving and powerful God who has already acted on our behalf, and so we have the confidence He will continue to do so. If we are in His will, following His way, then we have the confidence He hears us when we pray.

People want confidence. This is one of the reasons that science has taken over as the primary religion of the modern world. Many people turn to God for comfort and the things of the heart that science has a hard time providing, but when we want answers and something on which we can depend, our society goes to science because we see it as more dependable than God. As I was preparing this sermon this week, I ran across a candid acknowledgment of this. I went back a couple of episodes to catch up in a series I watch called, “Caprica.” I won’t go into the details, but it is a world much like our own, with science and at least two religions all pulling for the allegiance of the people. One of the characters is a sort of militant nun named Clarice. As I was thinking about the confidence we have before God, I heard these words put in Clarice’s mouth by the writers of the show. She said to the leaders of her church:

“We live in a remarkable era. Myth and mystery have been replaced by reason and science. I offer you a religion that removes the need for faith—a religion of certainty that reflects the wonder of all we have created.”

This is what the modern world wants. It is what people have wanted for ages. We want to be able to trust in ourselves and the products of our own hands. We

don’t want to trust in God because, at heart, we don’t really trust Him. In the other world that is Caprica the writers of the script were able to make the kind of religion they want. Full of faith and mystery, but in Clarice’s hands, dependant on science for confidence.

To the writers’ credit the response of the church’s highest prelate (a sort of female pope), was pretty good, even if her subsequent actions put the lie to her words. The response was:

“I trust the hand of god to actually play a role in our lives. It’s best to let these things play out as he sees fit.”

This needs to be our response too. We need to trust God to work things out as He sees fit. He actually does play a role in our lives. More to the point, we play a role in His creation and we need to be in prayer, worship, and Bible study so that we can discover and live faithfully the path He has given us. Our confidence is not in the idea that we have gotten rid of myth and mystery. Rather, our confidence is that we have found mystery in a world that seeks to deny it exists. Indeed our confidence is in the mystery of God with us. We have confidence because the creator of the universe has chosen us to be in relationship with Him, to know His love and His presence, to be guided by His Holy Spirit, and to spend eternity growing in our knowledge, and love for, Him. We are confident if we are God’s because we know He even hears us when we pray.

John adds, that, if God hears us, then we know we have whatever we ask of Him. This is often seen as a **dangerous** promise. Too often we read this and think it

turns God into some kind of cosmic vending machine simply there at the beck and call of willful people and subject to our whims. Nothing could be further from the truth. What John is saying is what Jesus said. God delights in providing for His people. He delights in surprising us with His loving kindness and blessings. He also delights in us when we do His will. When we ask **God** for the things He wants to give us anyway, should we be surprised when we get them?

One of the things we are expected to ask of God is to help, support, and hold each other. As John points out in verse 16, *“If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life.”* We are to ask God to give life, to secure the new life we talked about last week, in those of our number who are committing sin. We have been reminded regularly recently (and it is a good thing we have) that we already have victory over our sin because of the life that God has given us. We just need to learn to live in that victory, in the new life, instead of out of the old life. It is the old life that the cross of Jesus Christ has killed in all who belong to God. If we see another of our number in sin, we are called to ask God to bring them out of that sin and into life. Here again, we see that we are not responsible for one another, but we certainly are responsible to each other for how we live.

John said that we should pray for those who “commit a sin that does not lead to death.” His next couple of sentences seek to clarify that there is a sin that leads to death, and there are sins that do not lead to death. He is not suggesting that we pray for someone

who has committed the sin that leads to death, as that would be pointless.

Now, we have to admit, this can be a little confusing. After all, we have been taught that, “sin is sin,” right? What is the sin that leads to death, and why is it so much worse than the sins that do not lead to death (apart from the obvious)?

John has been talking about the sin that leads to death throughout this letter. It is a refusal to believe the **truth** and come to God as He is. It is the insistence that God be what and who we want Him to be rather than who He is. It is a heart and mind still given over to our own direction and not given over to God and the leading of the Holy Spirit. In short, the sin that leads to death is an unrepentant heart. There is no sin that God will not forgive if we humbly come to Him and ask for forgiveness. The only thing God cannot forgive is a heart that will not bow before Him.

People with unrepentant hearts can attend church for years. They can blend in and act right for a very long time, as long as they don’t actually have to share their lives. As long as they can just come for an hour or two and go through the motions of worship without really having to connect, they can fit right in with what a church is doing, feel good about themselves for helping out, think about how much God and the church owe them, and die in their sins, enemies of God and strangers to His grace.

John tells us to pray for those who commit a sin that does not lead to death, so that God will give them life. The reason for the prayer is that God will strengthen our brother or sister and he or she will

abandon the sin. We are always to work for greater holiness for ourselves and each other. Where we see sin we are to work with one another to get rid of it.

John also says, explicitly, that we are not to pray for life for a person who commits the sin that leads to death. Such a prayer would be a waste of breath. We may ask that God would change their heart. We may ask that God would break them so that they may bend to His will instead of their own. This can sometimes happen. Yet, these people have heard the gospel for years. They already have all they need for salvation and yet they are still far from God. To pray that God would bless them and fill them with His life would be an insult to God.

John says we should pray for the people who do believe, who show evidence in their lives that they are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Everyone does something on occasion that they know is wrong, and all wrongdoing is sin. Not all sin leads to death, because those who are in **Christ** are kept from death. Look with me at verse 18. *“We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.”* Those who are born of God may sin from time to time, especially when they are new to the faith, but they will not continue to live as they lived before they came to Christ. People who belong to God do not continue in sinful behavior and sinful patterns of living. As God gives them light to see their sin, they repent of it, setting it aside and determining they will not commit that sin any longer.

Because those born of God set sin and their will aside to follow God, the **evil** one cannot harm them.

They are under the protection of the Holy Spirit. They are in the arms of the Father, and nothing—and nobody—can pull them out. The evil one controls the world, but he does not control those who are in Christ. Satan has control over the culture and society around us, but he does not control anyone who is born of God.

*“We know also 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—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”* (v.20) What a wonderful way to end the letter. This is the third of three things that we know. We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin. We know that we are children of God. Finally, we know that the Son of God has given us understanding. We are back to the confidence with which we started. John reminds us that we know these things. We do not have to wonder or worry about them. They are true and we know they are true because we are kept by Him who is true. He has shown them to us both in His word and through His Holy Spirit.

This is the promise with which John wants to leave us, secure in the knowledge that we are God’s. Yet he adds one final sentence, a sort of afterthought and a reminder of the thing that so often pulls us astray.

*“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”* (v.21) We only know we are kept by God if we worship Him alone for who He really is. We must keep away from the things of this world that demand our worship, and from trying to make God who we want Him to be. If we do, we will know we have life and we will be able to enjoy it now and through eternity.