

Sermon Notes

Series on First John

First John 5:18-21

“Our Champion When We Sin!”

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Introduction: Here we are at the final sermon on the book of First John considering today the last four verses of this brief epistle. We began this series on November 18th of last year and we have shared together 18 lessons in order to complete a thorough study on these 5 short chapters. These final verses are basically restatements of John’s previous teachings in this epistle: (1) in verse 18 John restates the doctrine of sanctification; (2) in verse 19 he restates the doctrine of regeneration; (3) and in verse 20 he restates the doctrine about the Incarnation. In these concluding verses we discover **three additional certainties** or assurances about our Christian life, including our salvation/eternal life, that the Apostle John is stating in chapter five. John MacArthur provides an outline for chapter five which he titles, ‘Five Certainties’ and prefaces his remarks with these words, “we live in a world of uncertainty and doubt;” and we totally agree with his assessment.: (1) the certainty of eternal life which John writes about in verse 13 and a subject that he has presented throughout the entire book. The Apostle John always asserts that eternal life is given to those who place their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and will never be recalled or repeated (read 1 John 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13). (2) The certainty of answered prayer, verses 14-17. These first two we examined in previous lessons and today we’ll consider certainties number 3, 4 and 5. (3) The certainty of victory over sin and Satan, verse 18; (4) the certainty of belonging to God, verse 19; and (5) the certainty that Jesus Christ is God, verse 20. We need to keep in mind that the Apostle John was addressing those who were being influenced by the Gnostics; Gnostics were those who claimed special knowledge about God. At the end of his epistle, the Apostle John has deliberately chosen to affirm the certainties of believers using a key phrase which he repeats four times in verses 18 through 20, *we know* a total of five times in chapter five. The Greek word is οἶδαμεν, oidamen from the verb οἶδω, eido, meaning “to see; to perceive with the eyes; to see with the mind’s eye” signifying a clear and mental perception and understanding; *we know* with certain positive knowledge these truths. John utilizes *we know* to introduce these three additional certainties:

- Verse 18, *we know that no one who is born of God sins;*
- Verse 19, *we know that we are of God;*
- Verse 20, *and we know that the Son of God has come.*
- This triad of *we knows* provides the necessary outline for our sermon today—*we know, we know, we know!*

Actually, the Apostle John has been focused on what believers can *know* for certain if we compare 1:1-4; 2:3, 13, 14; & 3:14. In fact, depending on your concordance and translation there are perhaps as many as 36 occasions of this English word *know*. And I suggest that a reread of 1 John 5:13 is in order here, *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.* Whereas the socialist/communist, Karl Marx, used the phrase, “everlasting uncertainty,”

with striking contrast, the Apostle John exclaims certainties, and we want to consider three today. Philo said, “We can say nothing with certainty about anything because the picture presented to us is not constant.” Another philosopher wrote, “Our life has wrought of dreams and waking, fused of truth and lies; there lives no certitude.” But the Apostle John speaks of certainties, *we know*. In his closing comments, John synthesizes the major thoughts he’s presented to reinforce them for us.

The first thing that we can be sure of is...

#1 THE CERTAINTY OF DIVINE IMPARTED BIRTH, verse 18

...which John introduces with those very important words, *we know* as the Apostle John asserts that true believers will not be addicted to *sin* and could never boast about their sin as the Gnostics were doing.

Verse 18: The Apostle John states this sure confidence that the believer will not continue to *sin*, because of our divine birth—*born of God*, γεγεννημενος, gegennemenos, a perfect participle in the Greek to emphasize the permanency of our divine birth; our salvation has abiding results. John R. W. Stott adds, “He who has been begotten of God remains God’s child with permanent privileges and obligations. One of these obligations is expressed in the phrase that he sinneth not” (or *no one...sins*). [Stott, John R. W., The Epistles of John, Tyndale Bible Commentaries, Eerdmans, p.191]. In our daily battle against *sin*, we must keep our minds set on who we are in Jesus Christ—we are *born of God*. And because we are *born of God* we have the necessary resources to be free from habitual *sin*, from a life of *sin*. I find John’s statement fascinating for he’s basically stating that if God is our spiritual Parent we won’t continue to *sin* as a habit of life! *Sin* is a present tense in the Greek, αμαρτανει, amartanei; a Greek present tense to indicate both continuous action and active perseverance, ‘does not continue to *sin*. Having just explained in the previous verse, verse 17 that while *all unrighteousness is sin, there is a sin not leading to death*, so John does not want believers to mistakenly think that it’s normal for true children of God to live in *sin*. What the Apostle John is stating here is similar to what he writes in 3:4-10; for instance, notice especially 3:6 and the believer’s position of *abiding in Him*. The true Christians of John’s day were being *deceived* by the false teachers, the Gnostics, who were telling them that it was ok to *sin*. In 1 John 3:9, he writes something very similar to what we read here in 5:18. John bases his assertions that those who are *born of God* could not continue to *practice sin* because God’s *seed* lives in him—that’s the new birth/nature and that new nature cannot *sin*. Some Christians believe that, although we have the new birth/nature, we still have that old nature/capacity, and that nature is prone to *sin*. Therefore, some falsely conclude that our saving faith does not necessarily result in holy living, which was exactly what the Gnostics of John’s day were claiming. They drew a distinction between the material body and the spirit. For example; if someone in John’s day was frequenting temple prostitutes, they would have claimed something like this—that was just by body for my spirit is not tainted by that because its pure. John is declaring aloud—‘that’s nonsense!’ Again cf. 3:7-8. In chapter three the Apostle John is teaching doctrine but in chapter five he’s simply asserting the point. What he’s saying is, ‘when God is our Parent, we will not choose to continue to *sin*, even though we are tempted daily,

even moment by moment sometimes,' right? And it makes us so mad because it's the same kinds of *sins* over and over, right? And we wish that wasn't the case, but all too often it is. We feel so vulnerable and that's just when the *deceivers* have access to us, just like in John's day. So, what are we to do? Who will help us straighten out our messy lives? Where can we turn to for help? The answer is in Jesus, He birthed us! He's our Parent! That's a fabulous fact; God birthed us, that He's our Parent, as Christians we possess the sinless nature of the Lord Jesus Christ who indwells us. Do we really believe that truth? So, as in 1 John 3:9, the Apostle John doesn't state the same reasons here in verse 18 as he did there, but in the next phrase of verse 18, John gives further explanation to account for this truth that we won't continue to *sin*. John is not teaching sinless perfection here or anywhere in this epistle. My version (New American Standard Version) capitalizes the word *He* as it refers to the Lord Jesus Christ and the word *him*, which is not capitalized, refers to you and me, Christians. Interestingly, the KJV, NKJV, NIV and other versions also do not capitalize *He* as I believe it should be (although that is interpretation); but the TNIV (Today's New International Version), the New Living Bible and others do capitalize the *He*. Without the capitalization, the translation appears to be speaking to individuals like us but I don't believe that's John's intention. Notice that John confirms **two results** of this God birthing: (1) Jesus *keeps* us which can refer to the first or last clause in verse 18 or if you like, even to both—which I believe it does! The Greek is τηρει, terei, from the verb τερω, tereo, and is in the present tense and means "to guard from loss or injury; to attend carefully; or to keep an eye on." This is a different word than what we discover in verse 21 where the Greek word is φυλαζατε, phulassate, from the verb phulsasso, and translated *guard yourselves*. This phrase is not about us *keeping* ourselves although the New Testament speaks about that in 2 Timothy 5:22; James 1:27; & Jude 21. *Keeping* is the key to our perseverance as a Christian as Jesus *keeps* us from a life pattern of *sin* and from Satan as well. As for the unbeliever, the Bible teaches that he/she is controlled by *sin* and the *sin* nature (Jeremiah 17:9; John 8:34; Romans 6:16 & Galatians 5:19-21.) For the believer *sin* forfeits God's blessings, poisons love, and defeats the mind, heart and soul. So, John is asserting that because God birthed us, we can live a righteous and holy life. While we do fall into *sin*, we cannot live in it indefinitely. If a pig falls into a mud hole, he wallows in it and doesn't try to get out, because that's its nature. But if a sheep falls into a mud hole, it want to get out, get cleaned up and avoid that hole in the future, because it has a different nature. So with a true child of God! When the Bible states that God *keeps* us in our salvation, John is not asserting that He *keeps* us so that we can live as we please. We are to follow the Word of God and allow God's Holy Spirit to lead us. We are *kept* by Him—isn't that what John declares in His gospel in John 10:27-29? A must read from the Old Testament is Psalm 91:1-7 that corresponds to our text. John's lesson for us—Jesus *keeps* and protects you! Amen! Hallelujah! (2) A second result of God birthing us is that Satan cannot cling to us! The Apostle John clearly states that Satan cannot attach himself to us. The Greek word that translates *touch* is απτεται, aptetai, and has the idea "to attach oneself to; to fasten one's self to, to adhere." A. T. Robertson writes, "It means to lay hold of or to grasp rather than a mere superficial touch." [Robertson, A. T., New Testament

Word Studies.] This word is used only one other time in the New Testament, namely, John 20:17 to refer to a grasping hold of someone and not a superficial touching. This is a fascinating passage where Mary Magdalene demonstrates her love to Jesus by *clinging* to Him as she comprehends all that He is and all that He has done for her (read John 20:11-18). The Apostle John is asserting loud and clear that Satan cannot grasp and hold onto the person who has been born of God. That's great news isn't it? Now that doesn't mean that Satan won't seek us out, assault us, attack us, seek to extract the very life that God gave to us, (cf. Mark 8:33; Acts 5:3; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 7:5; 2 Corinthians 2:11; 11:14; 12:7; Ephesians 6:10-18; 1 Thessalonians 2:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; & 1 Peter 5:8). But he won't ever be successful because there is someone stronger than him who is *keeping* us. Amen! What a magnificent doctrine for believers to hold fast to—he aint gonna get us! (Read also Psalm 105:15.) But we must never forget that Satan can *tempt* us and *sift* us *like wheat* (Luke 22:31) with God's permission but he can never make us his sin slaves for the rest of our lives. One writer illustrates it with these words, 'we may fall into Satan's 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.' The Apostle John calls this one who cannot grasp believers, *the evil one*; in the Greek is πονερος, poneros, meaning "bad, of a bad nature, wicked," here obviously referring to Satan. Some lessons from this truth that Satan cannot grasp the believer: (1) One writer states that 'people always behave in harmony with what they believe themselves to be. Our behavior as Christians will be more holy when we view ourselves as children of God rather than children of the devil.' That's good biblical psychology! No Christian should feel like junk! (2) Christians cannot be demon possessed! (Cf. 1 Corinthians 10:21). A Christian will be tempted by Satan and may be influenced by demons but not owned. The enemy is going to attack believers for sure, but he cannot *touch/cling* to *him* because we belong to God. Satan is not over us; he is under us and subject to us.

A second certainty that we can be sure of is...

#2 DIVINELY IMPARTED CHARACTER, VERSE 19

Verse 19: The Apostle John writes that believers stand in stark contrast to the whole *world* which lies under the control of Satan, that wicked one. Notice also that John is now speaking personally and not generally. Earlier in verse 18 John wrote, *no one who is born of God*, but here he writes *we know that we are of God* personally. Another observation is that this is a restatement of 1 John 2:15. And here's an observation on the grammatical structure of the Greek, "In the first half of the verse, there is no expressed subject in substantival form, while in last half there is. This serves to throw the emphasis in the first half upon *ek tou theou*, which underscores the divine source of our life. In the last part of the verse, the emphasis is upon *ho kosmos holos*, indicating that all others are in a vastly different relationship. The change of prepositions from *ek* to *en* also changes the focus from source of life to sphere of life, or position in the evil one." [Cook, W. Robert, "Hamartiological Problems in First John, in "Bibliotheca Sacra," 123:491, July-September 1966, p. 260]. Therefore: (1) Believers are distinct from the *world's* system since we are God's children (cf. also 1 John 5:9-13); (2) Believers don't accept the *worldly* teaching of

Antichrists (cf. also 1 John 3:7-8); & (3) Believers don't give into the urgings of the flesh and its *worldly* lusts (cf. also 1 John 2:15-17). Notice the phrase, *the whole world lies in the power of the evil one*. The Greek word for *lies* is used metaphorically meaning "to be held in subjection by Satan." John is implying that the entire *world lies* helplessly in Satan's grasp! John is making it clear that this *evil* is of a global nature. Throughout John's little love letter, he has drawn a sharp distinction between believers and *the world* which he again highlights in this verse (cf. 3:1, 13; 4:4, 5; 5:4 & 5.)

- One group is grasped by Jesus the other is grasped by Satan!
- Jesus will not loosen His grip! Satan will not loosen his grip!
- We Christians have a spiritual enemy, in fact enemies with Satan's demons on the march against us.
- The *world* is not struggling against Satan; but instead is being lulled asleep in the grip of *the evil one*.

Isn't John making it clear that there's no middle ground—that is, one foot in the *world* and the other in God? There are only two places to dwell; either we belong to Him and totally distinct from Satan and the *world* or else we belong to the wicked one himself, Satan! The *whole world* is under Satan's domination—it's global! I like what one Bible teacher has written about this phrase, *the whole world lies in the power of the evil one*: It's "the picture of a stranded vessel on the sand of the seashore, unable to be moved; stranded, lying in the power of the sand; or a sow, lying in the mud, rejoicing in it; or Sampson in the arms of Delilah..." When I was in college, there was a song that became quite popular and maybe you too have sung it; "He's Got The Whole World In His Hands;" remember it? While it is true that the whole *world lies* under God's sovereign power; while in a spiritual sense today, the *whole world lies in the power of the evil one* too. Christians who love the *world* are enemies of God! Allow me to comment on this control by *the power of the evil one*. Everywhere we turn people are doing terrible things...really bad stuff. They give way in either subtle or overt fashion to all kinds of wickedness and destructive habits. Everywhere we look the *world* seems to be in the grip of this *evil one*. I spent Monday (June 23, 2008) looking at the news online as I never read the newspaper but just blogs and here are some of the headlines I found: (1) Nebraska man accused of firing a cross-bow at his neighbor; (2) Utah cop shot; (3) Strippers suing Los Angeles biggest men's/so called gentlemen's club; (4) Man assaulted and tied up his mother because he was upset over the death of his pet skunk; (5) British man in Massachusetts was lonely and wanted to start life all over again so he killed his wife and baby; (6) All the junk about the Entwistle murder trial; (7) Teens convicted of burning man to death at Russian WW2 memorial; & (8) the worst: Children fed so called silly pills and forced to perform sex shows right here in the great state of Texas; in Mineola! Children as young as 5 were fed powerful painkillers which they were told were 'silly pills' and then were forced to perform sex shows for a crowd of paying adults. Six adults have been charged in connection with this case including a parent of the three siblings involved. **But** we are different! Something has changed or more accurately stated, **Someone** has changed us! God is in our lives and we live for Him. And we have a message to take to those who *lie in the power of the evil one*, a message of hope

and freedom. In 2 Timothy 2:24-26 God gives believers an assignment; here is what God wants us to do so that those who are in Satan's grasp will *escape from his snare*—read it! Yes, believers can have an impact on our family, friends, coworkers and neighbors so that they can *escape Satan's snare*. And how will that happen? Not only by our prayers but also by our attitudes and willingness to serve others.

A third certainty that we can be sure of is...

#3 DIVINELY IMPARTED UNDERSTANDING, Verse 20

Verse 20: Dr. Stott states, “The third affirmation is the most fundamental of the three. It undermines the whole structure of the heretics’ theology. It concerns the Son of God through whom we alone can be rescued from *the evil one* and be delivered from *the world*. Both revelation and redemption are His gracious work. Without Him we could neither know God nor overcome sin.” [Stott, John R. W., The Epistles of John, Tyndale Bible Commentaries, Eerdmans, p.194]. This verse begins by exclaiming the doctrine of the Incarnation; Jesus has *come* in the flesh! Do you *know* that truth? Do you believe that Jesus is God, *come* in the flesh? John is asserting both the historical as well as the experiential *truth* of our Christianity. Dr. Townsend writes; “just as I John began with ‘the Word of Life’ (1:1) who ‘was with the Father’ (1:2) ‘from the beginning’ (1:1) and brought ‘eternal life’ (1:2), so I John closes on the theme of ‘eternal life’ (5:20). The apostle asserted: ‘He is the true God and eternal life’ (5:20). We should ask: to whom does the ‘He’ refer? John Stott answered, “Grammatically speaking, it would normally refer to the nearest preceding subject, namely his Son Jesus Christ. If so, this would be **the most unequivocal statement of the deity of Jesus Christ in the New Testament** (emphasis mine)...Luther and Calvin adopted this view. Certainly it is by no means an impossible interpretation. Nevertheless, ‘the most natural reference’ (Westcott) is to him that is true (KJV). In this way the three references to ‘the true’ are to the same Person, the Father...” [Townsend, James A., The Epistles of John & Jude, David C. Cook, p.63]. The Apostle John has already written about the ministry of Jesus such as in 4:9-10 where he writes about *the love of God was manifested in this, that God has sent His only begotten Son...and He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins*. John focus is different from the focus of many churches and preachers which emphasize a more sentimental love; John teaches that God *sent His Son* as the substitutionary atonement for our sins! The Second Person of the Trinity *has come*, took on Himself human nature, and became one of us. This is an amazing truth of the Bible that God *gave* the sacrifice as a propitiation for our sins; the same eternal Father who *sent the Son*, who voluntarily fulfilled His ministry all for us! As one writers sums it up, “God is love and He expresses His love in the propitiation, and to understand the propitiation is to understand the love of God. In verse 20, the Apostle John asserts that our confidence is based on God-given *understanding* which is supernaturally *given* (read 1 Corinthians 2:10-16). In this verse John is stating that God has *given* us the spiritual wisdom to come to the right conclusion about God and *truth*. The verbs, *come* and *given* are Greek perfect tenses emphasize that our confidence is based on the eternal permanence of this *truth* about God. Let’s ask ourselves; what do we really *know* about God? John writes that each one of us ought to

know both by the Word of God that God is real and by our experience with Him. John chooses his words carefully; he describes God as real which is the translation of the Greek word αληθινος, alethinos, meaning not just *true*, but real. The Apostle John often uses this word in his gospel, for example, John 6:32; 15:1; & 17:3. Stott adds, “this real God Christ has given us understanding to *know* (*ginoskomen* in contrast to *oidamen* at the beginning of the verse). We might paraphrase ‘we know as a fact that the Son of God has...given us understanding to come to perceive and know in experience Him who is Real...’ The present tense of *ginoskomen* implies ‘a continuous and progressive apprehension’ (Wescott). Not only do we know Him; we are also *in him*. Unlike the world who are ‘in the evil one’, we are in God, sharing His very life, as well as ‘of God’ (19), having derived our spiritual being from Him.” [Stott, John R. W., The Epistles of John, Tyndale Bible Commentaries, Eerdmans, p.195]. Some of you may recall when Coke Cola tried to pawn off a new formula for their cola? It didn’t work, so they had to market “Classic Coke Cola” as the real thing! Jesus is the only real Savior. That phrase, *we are in Him who is true*, boldly declares that we are in God’s domain—Satan can’t touch us. He’s *rescued us from the kingdom of darkness, Satan’s kingdom, to the kingdom of His dear Son* (Colossians 1:13 and read also v. 14 and cf. Galatians 1:4.). This is the 3rd time that John uses the word *true* in this verse—fascinating! And then there’s the discussion as to whether this *true* refers to the Father or to the Son? I basically ran out of time to thoroughly research this but scholars are divided and the decision won’t shatter anyone’s faith. How’s that for a copout? Oh well, if you’ve read the notes this far, you might as well know that I lean toward the position that this refers to Jesus as John has been focusing in his epistle on arguing for the deity of Christ against the false teachers of his day who were denying His deity (read 2:21-23). That’s what we should *know* and believe with all our hearts—do we? The unsaved, those in *the world*, can wear T-shirts with the words “Life is Good” blazoned across the front of them but be totally oblivious to the fact that they are in *Satan’s kingdom* and wandering perilously close to the edge of the abyss and headed for hell! What an awful thought! But we have assurance and confidence in our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. God doesn’t just want us *knowing* about Him. **He wants us knowing Him!** The final phrase in verse 20, *this is the true God and eternal life*, is so similar to Jesus’ words recorded by John in John 17:3—check it out! Review: So, *we know* three things for sure; our divine *birth* that means that we do not continue to *sin*; that we have His character because *we are of God*; & we have God-given *understanding* to know the *true* God.

Verse 21: I must comment on the final 6 words of this book. It’s as if John throws a final fastball right by us! *Little children, guard yourselves from idols*—Where did that come from? John never once mentioned *idols* or idolatry in this letter, did he? Does it fit? It does for idolatry is making up our own god as a substitute for the *true God* of the Bible who was sent from God and is revealed in Jesus Christ. The false teachers were doing just that as they were trying to win converts to a Savior who was less than deity. *Little children*, Greek is τεκνια, teknia, used in the New Testament as an affectionate address by teachers to their disciples. The Greek word φυλασσετε, phulassate, from the verb “to guard, keep

watch, to prevent escaping,” implying an assault from without; and figuratively, “to obey, preserve, avoid.” Do we have *idols*? Now we might not have *idols* like Paul saw in Ephesus and where the Apostle John sent this letter for there were many silversmiths who made a living making *idols* for people (read Acts 19:23-41). And we don’t have to go to Colombo, Sri Lanka, where Shama has said there are *idols* everywhere in that Buddhist nation. *Idolaters* make up their own gods to suit their desires and preferences. An *idol* doesn’t have to be carved out of wood but is anything that takes the rightful first place of God in our lives...anything! (read Ephesians 5:5 & Colossians 3:5). Could be family, human relationships ahead of our relationship with Christ, career, money, computer games, work, excessive devotion to leisure and recreation, using God to get what we want—all could become *idols*.

Conclusion: So, Christian—*guard yourself* from sin’s snare. Listen to this illustration: ‘On one occasion Norman ‘Kid’ McCoy, who was the welterweight boxing champion way back in 1896, was fighting a contender who had the misfortune of being deaf. When McCoy discovered his opponent’s disability, he wasted no time taking advantage of it. Near the end of the third round McCoy stepped back a pace and pointed to his adversary’s corner, indicating that the bell had rung. “Oh, thank you so much” said McCoy’s opponent. “Very civil of you.” But the bell hadn’t rung at all, and as soon as the other boxer dropped his hands and turned away, McCoy immediately knocked him out. Sin will take the same cruel advantage of us that Kid McCoy did of his deaf opponent. If we listen to it even for a moment and drop our guard, it can destroy us.’ [Adapted from Little Brown Book of Anecdotes by Clifton Fadiman, Little Brown & Company, pp. 376-377.]

Note: It is my prayer that these printed notes will encourage Bible students to do further study on this passage. If you find any typos, errors or have any questions, please contact me. Since these notes are also available on our website, www.gcc-am.org, your assistance in drawing my attention to necessary corrections will be greatly appreciated. Thank you.
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