

# Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, October 16, 2024 – First Baptist Church Buda  
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study



## THAT YOU MAY KNOW – A STUDY OF 1,2 & 3 JOHN *Know This, Guard Yourself!* *1 John 5:18-21*

*“<sup>18</sup> We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him. <sup>19</sup> We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. <sup>20</sup> And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. <sup>21</sup> Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.” – 1 John 5:18-20 (NKJV)*

### **BACKGROUND AND SETTING FOR 1<sup>ST</sup>, 2<sup>ND</sup>, & 3<sup>RD</sup> JOHN:**

- (1) **AUTHOR = The Apostle John** – Tradition holds that John was sentenced to death in a boiling vat of oil, yet he emerged unharmed from the experience. Again tradition tells us that John lived into old age perhaps dying sometime after AD 98... He is thought to have died in Ephesus – But in fact the mystery and unknowns concerning John’s death and what happened to him are not known and are varied...
- (2) **DATE = A.D. 90-95** - As with most books in the Bible, we cannot know for certain when and from where these epistles were penned. As to a date, it is commonly believed to have been written close to the end of the 1st century, with a fairly wide possible time frame... somewhere between 90-95 A.D.
- (3) **PLACE OF WRITING = Ephesus** – It is believed by most Biblical scholars that John wrote these letters from Ephesus, the place believed to be where he died. It is usually accepted that John wrote them late in his life.
- (4) **RECIPIENTS = Different audiences** - The Epistles of John were written to various audiences. They were all written after John was an old man living in Ephesus.

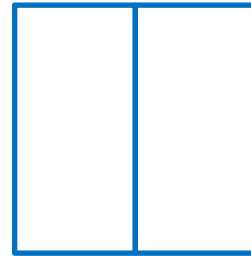
(5) **PURPOSE = Multiple purposes** - In terms of a positive stated purpose, John actually gives us reasons why he wrote these epistles:

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*“<sup>18</sup> We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him. <sup>19</sup> We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. <sup>20</sup> And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. <sup>21</sup> Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.” -1 John 5:18-21 (NKJV)*

Although I have not studied it since my high school days... over 44 years ago, I enjoyed studying geometry. It was the only kind of “math” I really liked (I wasn’t a good math student... at all). Geometry, remember, was based on theorems (statements, proposition, formulas) and axioms (maxims, adages, truisms). 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.

An **example** of an **axiom** is the statement “halves of equal are equal”. A **theorem** is a mathematical statement that can and must be proven to be true.



In **Ben Sternke** and **Matt Tebbe’s** book, “**Having the Mind of Christ,**” they give eight axioms in the Christian faith. In their book they define an “axiom” as “a self-evident truth, a universally accepted principle that is assumed, upon which one can act or argue.”

### **8 Axioms to Cultivate a Robust Faith: (Ben Sternke and Matt Tebbe, “Having the Mind of Christ”)**

- (1) **Axiom 1 = God is love -**
- (2) **Axiom 2 = God is always present and at work -**
- (3) **Axiom 3 = God is just like Jesus (and vice-versa) -**
- (4) **Axiom 4 = God meets us in our messy reality -**
- (5) **Axiom 5 = God cares about (all of) it more than we do –** If God cares about (all of) it more than we do, then perhaps this opens up for us a new way to be present in our lives. What if we could trust that God is at work, even when we are unaware of it? What if we can relax, knowing that it isn’t at all up to us to make discipleship and growth or transformation happen? If God cares about (all of) it more than we do, that means the stuff that’s most important to us, our family and friends, our church community, our job

and vocation, our neighborhood and world – all of it – is of keen and specific concern to God. Every good thing that’s worth caring about, everything that we do care about, God cares about more.

- (6) **Axiom 6 = God does the same work through us and in us** – St. Augustine said, “**The fire you want to ignite in others must first burn within you.**” What God does through us, God does in us or as this 6<sup>th</sup> axiom states it, “God does the same work through us and in us.” There is an essential coherence and wholeness to how God works in us and through us. It’s all one thing. At least it seems that’s the ways Jesus saw it... good soil produces a good crop, a good tree produces good fruit. Ben Suet, out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, and perhaps the organic metaphor par excellence from Jesus: a branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine.
- (7) **Axiom 7 = God’s love always reckons with power** – God is omnipotent... all-powerful. He could be also holy, and we are not. He could and perhaps should pour out his wrath on us destroying us with one breath from His lips, but He doesn’t why? Love! We are to love like that... both God and others. Do we? When others have wronged us, harmed us, hurt us, spoken against us, disagreed with us, etc. we have within our power to be unforgiving to them, disparage them, malign them, speak evil of them, harm them back, even hate them if we wanted to... but what does God’s “agape” love in us do? Why
- (8) **Axiom 8 = God transforms us through embodied participation** – This means that we grow in our capacity to receive and give God’s love not merely by thinking or believing correctly, but rather by trusting Jesus in our bodies, taking concrete steps of faith in our actual lives and relationships.

Throughout First John, the apostle has been concerned about what we as Christians can know for certain. Remember this study on 1 John is entitled, “**That You May Know.**” As we are concluding this letter of 1 John let’s look at/review what we have heard John specifically tell us we can know... In fact a quick survey of this 5 chapter letter reveals at least the following things we can know:

### **22 Things We Can Know (and be assured/certain of) According to 1 John:**

- (1) We can know that we know God (1 John 2:3, 13, 14; 1 John 4:7)
- (2) We can know that we are in God (1 John 2:5)
- (3) We can know that it is the last hour (1 John 2:18)
- (4) We can know the truth (1 John 2:21; 1 John 3:19)
- (5) We can know that Jesus is righteous (1 John 2:29)
- (6) We can know that we will be like Jesus (1 John 3:2)
- (7) We can know Jesus appeared to take away sins (1 John 3:5)
- (8) We can know that Jesus is sinless (1 John 3:5)
- (9) We can know that we have passed out of death into life (1 John 3:14)
- (10) We can know no murderer has eternal life (1 John 3:15)
- (11) We can know love (1 John 3:16; 1 John 4:16)
- (12) We can know that God abides in us (1 John 3:24; 1 John 4:13)

- (13) We can know the Spirit of God (1 John 4:2)
- (14) We can know the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:6)
- (15) We can know that we love God's children (1 John 5:2)
- (16) We can know that we have eternal life (1 John 5:13)
- (17) We can know that God answers prayer (1 John 5:15)
- (18) We can know that we will not practice sin (1 John 5:18)
- (19) We can know that we belong to God (1 John 5:19)
- (20) We can know that the Son of God has come (1 John 5:20)
- (21) We can know that the Son of God has given us understanding (1 John 5:20)
- (22) We can know Him who is true (1 John 5:20)

Throughout First John, the apostle has been concerned about what we as Christians can know for certain.

- *John began the letter with the certainty of his firsthand, eyewitness testimony of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-4)*
- *In 1 John 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 (1 John 2:13)*
- *He writes to the children, because they know the Father (1 John 2:14).*
- *He says (1 John 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 1 John 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 1 John 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.*

<sup>18</sup> *We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.* <sup>19</sup> *We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.* <sup>20</sup> *And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.* <sup>21</sup> *Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen." -1 John 5:18-21 (NKJV)*

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 in 1 John 5:21... notice it there. He writes, *“<sup>21</sup> Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.”*

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 1 John 5:18-21:

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

## SOME THINGS TO KNOW

John says in our passage, that we know three things. Notice verses 18-20, *“<sup>18</sup> We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him. <sup>19</sup> We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. <sup>20</sup> And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” – 1 John 5:18-20 (NKJV)*” Let’s look at them...

### 3 Things We Know:

(1) **We know that no one who is born of God lives in sin (1 John 5:18)** - *“<sup>18</sup> We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.”* John has just explained in 1 John 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 1 John 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.” Do Christians not sin? Once one comes to Christ do they never sin again? Our experience does not bear this out... not even personally... and that is a problem for us. So what are we to think of the idea that “no one who is born of God sins”?

## **Christians Struggling with Sin and 4 Lies We Believe:**

**1. LIE #1: As a Christian, I should live a perfect life** – We may not admit this out loud, because it sounds extreme. But we often think it. After all, didn't Jesus say, "*Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48)?

- Absolutely. But Jesus referred to God's standard we should strive for. Jesus also understood the reality that we fail that standard. That's why He died for our sins.
- What we really tell ourselves with this lie is: "*If I'm not perfect, God is angry with me.*" When we listen to the lie, we confuse our freedom from sin's *penalty* with our freedom from sin's *presence*.

I love **Chuck Swindoll's** definition of the term, *justification*, "*Justification is the sovereign act of God whereby He declares righteous the believing sinner while he or she is still in a sinning state.*" When we believe in Jesus, God doesn't *make* us righteous. He *declares* us righteous. We're still sinners who aren't free from sin's temptations. Our being *made righteous* won't occur until our death or the Rapture—whichever comes first. (I'm pulling for the Rapture.)

**2. LIE #2: I've tried to stop sinning, but I can't... I must not be saved** - This lie takes the false assumption of LIE #1 a step further. Because you don't live a perfect life like you should, that means you were never saved to begin with.

- But think about it. Just as we couldn't save ourselves—we needed God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9)—so we cannot live the Christian life in our own strength.
- We still need God's grace to provide the strength for obedience.
- The Apostle John reminds us that we lie if we say we have no sin—and that Jesus is our atoning sacrifice for that very reason (1 John 1:8; 2:1).

**Wayne Stiles** said, "*You cannot out-sin the grace of God. God the Father never abandons His children.*" The truth is, your struggle against sin is a huge clue that the Spirit of God is working in your life. Because the New Testament constantly gives instruction to Christians struggling with sin, we understand that it is a normal experience.

- Scripture speaks not only to the temptations this world offers but it also reminds us of our ongoing vulnerability to those temptations (2 Corinthians 6:14).
- The same weaknesses that bound us to sin in the old life we bring with us into the new.

**3. LIE #3: I'll never stop my sin, so why try?** - While it's true you'll never be free from temptation or from the pull in your heart towards sin, you can experience victory. (Unlike a circus elephant who doesn't know any better.)

- Freedom of choice is part of who God made us to be as humans. God created Adam and Eve with the capacity to choose (Genesis 2:16-17). Begin to see temptation as a choice rather than as a compulsion to obey (Romans 6:12-14).
- God delivered us from sin's slavery in order to obey Him, not so that we would submit ourselves again to sin's shackles (Galatians 5:1). Freedom has a purpose: obedience.

**4. LIE #4: My sin is too great... I'm really not sure God will forgive me -** Sometimes Christians struggling with sin blow it big-time. And because we knew better—and yet did it anyway—we fall for the lie that tells us we crossed a point of no return with God.

- Actually, this lie stems from our pride. There is no sin—NO SIN—too great for God's forgiveness. Your sin is no exception. There may be life-long consequences, but God's grace always offers forgiveness.
- The Lord has given you the promise that if you have believed in Jesus who died for your sins, God has already accepted you.

*Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. —Romans 8:1* Remember, you cannot out-sin the grace of God. God never abandons His children.

Since John has clearly said that believers do sin (in 1 John 1:8, 10; 1 John 2:1; 1 John 5:16), he must mean here that no genuine child of God lives in a state of sin. In verse 9 of 1 John 3, 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

1 John 3:9, *"<sup>9</sup> Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God."*

1 John 5:18, *"<sup>18</sup> We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him"*

*What are we to do with these verses in 1 John? We do we make of this?*

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 **verse 18** of our passage, 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 (1 John 5:19) –** *“<sup>19</sup> We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.”* This is a restatement of 1 John 2:15, *“<sup>15</sup> Do not love the world or 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 (1 John 3:1, 13; 1 John 4:4, 5; 1 John 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 verse 19 of our passage, 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*” (1 John 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 (1 John 5:20)** – “<sup>20</sup> *And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.*” 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 (1 John 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:

### **A Reminder of John’s 3 Axioms:**

- 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:

## **SOME THING TO BE WARNED ABOUT**

Notice verse 21... John’s last words in his letter that seem to pop out of nowhere. He writes, “<sup>21</sup> *Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.*”

### **Here is John’s closing warning: As God’s little children, we must guard ourselves from idols (1 John 5:21)**

As I said earlier, 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.

What is an idol and idolatry? Here is a pretty good definition for your.

**Idolatry: “Making up your own god as a substitute for the one true God, who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ”**

I think that we usually don't think of “idolatry” as a problem we struggle with, but that would be a wrong assumption. 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. But that is not really the one that hits closest to home. Idolatry extends beyond the worship of idols and images and false gods. **Our modern idols are many and varied. Even for those who do not bow physically before a statue, idolatry is a matter of the heart—pride, self-centeredness, greed, gluttony, a love for possessions and ultimately rebellion against God. Is it any wonder that God hates it?**

Our Lord made it clear in **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, and so is worship, adoration, adorning, anything higher than we worship and adore God/Jesus.

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.

**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!

### **5 Things Christians Need to Know About Idolatry:**

**(1) Nearly anything... even good things can become idols** - God clearly does forbid the making of statues to worship, and it is true that most of us have never done that. But idols

don't have to be made of wood and stone. They can just as easily be more intangible things like power, fame, wealth, or popularity. In fact, John Calvin said that, "Our hearts are idol factories", and constantly making what Tim Keller calls *counterfeit gods*. The things we idolize are not always sinful in and of themselves. In fact, they are often good things which have been given as gifts from God. **The problem comes when we forget the Giver and instead worship the gift.** When we expect a gift to function *as* our god rather than enjoying it with gratitude *toward* God, we twist its purpose and the good gift turns rotten.

- For example, **power** can be a good thing if used for the right purposes, but it becomes a terrible thing when it is pursued at all costs.
- **Fame** can be a platform to share hope and help, but it becomes a dangerous thing when the pursuit of it becomes our master.
- **Wealth** can be wonderful if it is shared generously, but it becomes a toxic thing when it becomes our single-minded focus.
- **Popularity** can be a fine thing if we're using it to build community, but it can become a destructive thing when we crave it and feel empty when we can't get more and more.

It's a normal and human thing to desire the gifts that God gives. But it is important to rightly order our desires, keeping God Himself and knowing Him as our greatest desire, saying with the Psalmist in Psalm 42:1-2, "*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?*" Unfortunately, when our desires get disordered, we begin greedily panting after God's gifts while trying to ignore Him as the Giver.

(2) **At its root, idolatry is greed-** Colossians 3:5 says, "<sup>5</sup> Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." Did you notice it... "*greed...is idolatry.*" The dictionary definition of "greed" is an "intense selfish desire" for something. The Bible is full of warnings about the consequences of greed:

- Greed is part of a collection of negative characteristics describing the unrighteous (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)
- Greed brings ruin (Proverbs 15:27)
- Greed stirs up conflict (Proverbs 28:25)
- Greed eats away gratitude and contentment (Ecclesiastes 5:10)
- Greed is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

When we crave something more than we desire God or want to serve God, it becomes an idol and it gains the power to enslave us (Galatians 4:8) while never providing the fulfillment we had hoped for. Paul warns Christians to "flee from idolatry" (1 Corinthians 10:14). God is rightly angered when his creation wants other created things more than they want to know Him as their Creator (Isaiah 44:9-23)

- (3) **Turning toward idols means turning away from God and vice versa** – Matthew 6:24 says, *“<sup>24</sup>No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”* The Bible says that *“no one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.”* In this specific verse, Jesus was talking about the idol of wealth, saying *“You cannot serve both God and money”* (Matthew 6:24). But the concept conveyed in this teaching is open-ended. You cannot serve both God and \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank).

We cannot have it both ways. Choosing idols means rejecting God, and choosing God means rejecting idols. We can't walk in two directions at one time. When the Bible speaks of idols, it often talks about “turning away” and “turning to.”

Jonah 2:8 says that *“those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.”* Conversely, Paul rejoices that the Thessalonians *“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”* (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

The Bible also refers to turning away from God as an exchange in Jeremiah 2:11, *“My people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols.”* And what an unwise exchange it is! In the same passage, God goes on to say, *“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water”* (Jeremiah 2:13). Turning from God and trying to satisfy ourselves with idols is an exchange that will lead only to futility and continued thirst.

- (4) **The only antidote to idols is a superior affection** - We all worship something. If we are not worshipping God, idols will naturally slip in to fill the void. In our passage... in 1 John 5:21 John urges, *“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols,”* but doing so can seem impossible in a world filled with the siren songs of gifts masquerading as gods. The only way to overcome love for idols is to be overcome with a greater love. Thomas Chalmers writes that it is impossible to merely get rid of idols, because *“the heart must have something to cling to...Therefore the superior affection for God through the free Gospel of Christ is necessary to displace worldly affections.”* God is not embarrassed by our strong affections or desires. In fact, C.S. Lewis explains, *“It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”*

- (5) **Idols take, God gives** - God is called a *“jealous God”* many times in the Bible (e.g. Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 4:24, Joshua 24:19, Psalm 78:58, Ezekiel 39:25) and humans are called to worship Him alone. At first, this description of God might seem

like a negative trait, as if He is being demanding or selfish. But He is also omniscient, meaning He knows everything, including the fact that we will never find true fulfillment apart from worshipping Him. That is why he is continually calling out—through the law and the prophets and the gospels and the epistles alike—that He is better than any idol we could possibly devise. We will find salvation and true satisfaction in no one else.

God says to his idolatrous people in Daniel 5:23, *“You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.”*

- Idols cannot see, while God sees everything.
- Idols cannot do anything for themselves, while God is all-powerful.
- There are several passages that show the impotence of idols by describing in detail how people created them with their own hands—cutting wood and carving it and using the leftovers to stoke their cook fires... (Isaiah 44:15).
- God, on the other hand, is not made by human hands. Rather, he created *us*.
- Idols, whether physical (statues) or intangible (power, fame, wealth, etc.), will passively receive love and worship, but they will never give back nor do they have any power to save their worshippers.
- They are an addiction, not a relationship.
- But God is dynamic and relational, showing steadfast love and giving Himself for those who seek Him and powerfully helping them in their times of need when they cry out to Him (Hebrews 4:14-16).

*“For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.”* (Psalm 96:4-5)

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 several years ago told about how treasure hunters looking to make a huge profit were stealing rare idols from the Hopi reservation. The worst theft happened in 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!

Have you bought into true Christianity, or could your faith be a cheap, phony substitute? John gives you three test questions:

**3 Concluding Tests to Ask Yourself From 1 John:**

- 1. The doctrinal test: Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, come in the flesh?**
- 2. The ethical test: Does your life reflect growing obedience to Christ?**
- 3. The relational test: Does your life reflect growing, practical love for others?**

Is the whole process permeated with the joy of fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ? Your eternal destiny rides on passing the test! If any of these areas is lacking, our studies in 1 John should help get you ready for the big final exam.