

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Walking in the Light with Jesus

(Studies in the Apostle John's first letter)

Confident in Prayer, in Jesus

(1 John 5:14-21)

Study #8

Introduction: The heart behind "next steps"...

Over the past couple of years here at Northwest, we have emphasized the importance of taking "next steps" with Jesus. That's become part of our vocabulary, and I think it's great.

It's our way of talking about living the life of a disciple. We take "next steps" of faith and obedience.

We also talk about helping others take "next steps" with Jesus, and that's become our way of framing Jesus' Great Commission that we make disciples. (Matthew 28:18-20) Personally, I think this "next steps" thing is a pretty helpful way of talking and thinking.

But, in considering "next steps", it is possible that we might omit a critical component that is at the heart of both personal discipleship and the Great Commission.

We pursue next steps with Jesus because Jesus tells us to live the life of a disciple. True. And we help others take next steps with Jesus because He tells us to make disciples. Also true.

But, there's more going on here than foot-soldiers carrying out the orders of a commanding general.

A dad or a mom will try to convince a son or a daughter to use money wisely. If their child pushes back and asks, "Why?" the parent might say, "Because I said so!" - but that's not really what's going on.

The parent wants the child to use money responsibly because they love their child and want the best for him or for her. The parent's motivation in training their child is love.

When Jesus invites us to the life of a disciple, it's because that is the life we were designed to live. It's a life of meaning and purpose. It's the beautiful life. Jesus invites us to that life because He loves us.

And when He tells us, "make disciples", it is because He wants us to so love others that we want them to taste the beauty of the life of following Jesus that we've tasted.

Inviting your friend to take a "next step" with Jesus is the most loving thing you can do for your friend. It is because we love them that we urge them to walk with Jesus.

This letter we've been studying over the past couple of months from the Apostle John has been all about taking next steps with Jesus. It's been all about entering a life marked by love and holiness. The final section of this letter marries love and holiness in a most powerful way.

Review...

John wrote both the Gospel by his name *and* this letter we call "1 John." Both revolve around the theme of eternal life, but they do so differently.

John wrote his Gospel so that his readers might ***[John 20:31] believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing [they] might have life through His name.***

He wrote 1 John so that we ***[1 John 5:13] who believe in the Name of the Son of God...may know that [we] have eternal life.*** He wrote so that we who believe would enter fully into the riches of the eternal life we possess.

Based on everything John writes in this letter, you who believe in Jesus can be assured that you are a child of God. And if you are His child, you know for sure that you have eternal life.

When you have confidence about that one thing, you can be very confident in many other things. Among them, John lists prayer.

Confidence in Prayer (vv. 14-15)

What God is Listening For (v. 14)

[14] This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

Confidence before God (v. 14a)

We'll talk about prayer a lot today. But for just a moment, think with me about the confidence we can have in other areas, now that we know that we have eternal life.

In this letter, John has told us that if we "abide in Him", we'll have confidence at the future Judgment Seat of Christ.¹

Confidence in God may manifest itself in evangelistic boldness. When we know that we have eternal life, a passion that others gain the same assurance is unleashed.

Being certain of our standing with God can lead us to be deeper and more honest with others. When we're secure in Jesus we're freed up to expose how we're REALLY doing in our personal lives - nothing to hide, nothing to fear.

We can eagerly affirm what we see that is good in someone else and be willing to call a good friend to repentance.

All that is true. But what we read here at the end of the letter is that our eternally secure relationship with God will give us great confidence in prayer.

John has a tip for us with respect to praying confidently. We must pray according to God's will.

The prayer that God hears (v. 14b)

Jesus and God's will

When Jesus was teaching His disciples how to pray, He gave center stage to God's will. He told us to pray, ***[Matthew 6:10] "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven."***

He practiced what He preached, too. On the night before His crucifixion, there He was in the Garden of Gethsemane, looking ahead to the horror of that death.

His first concern was God's will. ***[Mark 14:36] "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will."***

As it was for Jesus, so for us. God's will is to be the prime concern of our prayers. And that begs the question, "How do we know what God's will is?"

And His will is...?

Well, God's will is expressed in His commandments, which are found in His Word. The Bible doesn't tell us His will about everything. But we are told to pray about everything.

Pray about jobs and major purchases and health and who to marry. If you want to, pray that you'll make the light at 1604 and Bandera. Pour out your heart to God in prayer about all of it.

God cares about all of it and He loves to hear you when you go to Him in prayer.

¹ 1 John 2:28; 4:17.

John says here, though, that it's when we pray about the thing that God explicitly says is His will that we can know that He "hears us", as in He is eager to say, "Yes!"

The Prayer God Answers (v. 15)

[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.

About prayer...

That's powerful. But let's not misunderstand what the Bible tells us about the power of prayer.

Prayer feeds our relationship with God and it is our declaration of dependence on God. Prayer is the best means available to say that what God can do is greater than what we can do. Prayer allows us to partner with God in what He is doing in the world.

Prayer allows us to align our lives with His sovereignty, but it certainly doesn't give us sovereignty. Prayer isn't like that.

Still, by God's grace, our prayers do, actually make impact. The Bible is clear about that.

About God's ways...

Prayer and its impact

God's will is something of a mystery. In one sense, God's will IS that which will happen. Jesus will return. Satan will be defeated. You who believe will never be lost.

But there is another sense in which the Bible uses the term "God's will" that is tentative.

God wants some things to happen which will happen if we *live* faithfully. He wants some things to happen which will happen if we *pray* faithfully.

It is impossible to read the Bible without coming away with the conviction that some things happened when people prayed that wouldn't have happened had they not prayed.

Today, you and I can have confidence that our prayers make a difference.² Some things will happen, today, that would not have happened had you not prayed.

But, as you well know, the answers to your prayers won't always (usually?) come as you imagine they will.

Prayer and its fulfillment

Sometimes, the answer will be instantaneous. Sometimes, your prayer may set off a chain reaction that will result in a "Yes" ten years down the road.

God may use your prayer to launch a journey of spiritual maturity that will take you through the valley of the shadow of death.

About many things, we will pray without a promise that God will say, "Yes". That's OK. Pray. Prayer will change you. God will use your prayers to change your world in ways you never saw coming.

But, here (v. 15) John makes a promise. He says that we can pray with confidence when we pray for what His Word says is His will. For instance...

About this promise...

Pray that God will help you learn to love your family in Jesus, your Christian brothers and sisters. He'll say "Yes" every time.

² Bible scholar, I. Howard Marshall writes, "To speak in such terms is to assume that God's will must be understood in a static kind of way, as if God has made a detailed plan beforehand of all that is going to happen - including the fact that we are going to pray. But our relationship with God is real and dynamic. Our prayers do make a difference in what happens. And the accomplishment of God's will in the world does depend on both our prayers and our work." (commentary on 1 John)

Pray that God will grow you up, spiritually, that you will manifest the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience and all the rest. He loves to answer that prayer. Prayer that prayer faithfully, over the course of years, and watch as your character matures, your love grows deeper, your presence sweeter, your ways more peaceable.

Pray to God for grace to use your words to build up and not to tear down; pray for strength to stand firm against temptation to sin; pray for wisdom to know how to press Jesus into the lives of those who are coming after you; pray for open doors to help someone you know take a next step with Jesus, today.

God loves to answer those prayers.

Now, convinced of the answer to our prayer when we pray **[15] according to His will**, John moves to his own “for instance.”

This one, I believe, is more than one application among many. John was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write this one down for people like us for all time. This that follows is central to what he has been aiming at throughout the letter.

From the beginning of 1 John, he has been warning us against falling into sin. He wants us to pursue holiness. And, he’s been urging us to love one another. Those themes of love and holiness come together in these last words about prayer.

The Life-Saving Ministry of Prayer (vv. 16-17)

[16] If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. [17] All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.

OK, I know that may be a bit confusing. Actually, that might be a lot confusing. I’ve spent the better part of a week wrestling with these two verses and still have questions.

So, let’s see if we can sort out John’s main thought.

Sin, generally

In these verses, John makes comments about “*sin leading to death*” and “*sin not leading to death.*”

The confusing part of that is that elsewhere, Scripture tells us that *all* sin is deadening.

Sometimes, it is a physical death that is in view, as in **[Romans 5:12]...through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men...**

Sometimes, the death in view is spiritual in nature, as in **[Ephesians 2:1] And you were dead in your trespasses and sins...**

The point is that wherever there is sin, something dies. Always. Innocence dies. Joy dies. Peace dies. Sometimes, a human life ends as a body dies. So, the death may be spiritual or it may be physical. But there is no experience of sin that doesn’t bring a death of some sort.

What kind of a death does John have in mind here? Well, I think it’s pretty clear that John is referring to physical death.

Remember, he’s writing to Christians and he’s explicitly writing about a Christian “**brother**” committing sin. There is no danger of a Christian suffering spiritual death.

To be spiritually dead is to be separated from God. The Christian is united with God. He’s passed out of death into life.³

There is no sin a Christian can commit that will result in spiritual death. But, there are evidently sins a Christian might commit that lead (“*directly*” or “*immediately*”) to death. Other sins don’t.

You’re not surprised to learn that there are theories floating around as to what John means by all of this.

³ See John 5:24; 1 John 3:14.

Two sorts of sin

Division of sins

Some scholars divide the two types of sin into categories of “serious” and “not so serious” (think *mortal* and *venial*). The problem with that is that there is no biblical list of the really-bad (leading to death) sins vs the not-so-bad (not leading to death) sins. Where should the line be drawn, and who gets to decide where to draw that line?

Others divide the types of sin into “intentional” and “unintentional” sins. This would be the difference between someone who didn’t really mean to keep his foot on the accelerator as the car nudged its way up to 80mph on Loop 1604 vs the guy who races down Guilbeau Road at 80mph.

It’s an accident vs a high-handed sin. It’s harvesting your neighbor’s grain because of a measurement error vs King David’s sins of adultery and murder. One was an honest mistake (not leading to death) and the other was cold, calculated evil (leading to death).

So, sure. That might be what John has in mind. But, if all intentional sins lead to death, not many of us should still be alive today.

Still another way to divide the types of sin is into the categories of “chronic” vs “episodic” sin.

The suggestion here is that sins leading to death are those that are unrepented of, persisted in. In other words, sins, generally start off as sins NOT leading to death. They morph into sins leading to death over time and by repetition, as the sinful pattern becomes more ingrained in our character.

There are reasons to embrace any one of these ideas. They’re all decent constructs.

But, to be honest, there’s nothing in the Bible that says we should see the difference in a sin that leads to death vs a sin that does not lead to death being seriousness, intentionality, or repetition.

There is, though, one other way of identifying the difference that does find its foundation in the biblical text.

Sin that harms God’s family (Acts 5; 1 Corinthians 11)

In the early life of the church in Jerusalem, some in the church who were wealthy were selling property and bringing the proceeds of the sale to the apostles, who would distribute to people in need.

Ananias and Sapphira, a husband/wife team, tried to pull a fast one on the church. They wanted the reputation of generosity without the inconvenience. They wanted to be thought of as charitable without having to *actually* sacrifice to serve their fellow Christians.

They told the apostles that they were giving ALL the proceeds of the sale of a piece of property to meet the needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ. They lied. They only gave a portion of the sale.

They lied to the Holy Spirit by lying to the church. As a result, first Ananias, and then his wife, Sapphira died. God judged them for harming Jesus’ church.

Then, when the Apostle Paul was giving instructions to the church in the city of Corinth about how to observe the taking of the bread and the cup of Communion (the word means “fellowship”), he warned against taking the elements **“unworthily.”** (1 Corinthians 11)

Paul reminded them that because some people had taken Communion unworthily - while they were drunk, without sharing their food with the poor, while they were at odds with members of their Christian family - **[1 Corinthians 11:30]...many among you are weak and sick and a number sleep.** (“sleep” being a euphemism for death)

I bring up both of these incidents here because they are the only examples we have in the New Testament of believers in Jesus committing **“sin leading to death”.**

In each case, the sin involved harming the unity and the witness of Jesus’ church.

While I can't say, "*Thus saith the Lord!*" on this, I do think it's most likely that the kind of sin John has in mind when he mentions sin "**leading to death**" is a sin committed by a Christian that intentionally harms Jesus' bride, the church. It damages fellow Christians.⁴

The burden of John's message in this passage, though, is NOT to figure out what sins lead to death. It's what to do when we see a fellow Christian sinning in such a way that is NOT leading to death.

Responses to the sins of our family

For sin NOT leading to death

To begin with, imagine someone falling into something.

For imagination's sake, imagine someone walking out on to a frozen lake, hitting a spot of thin ice and falling into the icy water. Or imagine someone falling into quicksand and being pulled by gravity down through the muck.

They're stuck in the mud or flailing at the icy water and they can't get out of their mess.

It's not too hard to mentally switch from that image to one of a Christian getting caught up in sin. He's fallen into any of the many forms of unrighteousness available.

Since most sins that Christians commit are not followed by immediate death, we'll place these sins in the category of sin NOT leading to death.

Think of gossip or lying, boasting or envy, drunkenness, greed, gluttony, lust. Sins like these.

⁴ While it may be helpful to think about which sins "lead to death", it is not crucial that we know. It is more important that we can identify the sorts of sins which do NOT lead to death, since it is only when we see our brother sinning in this way that we have an obligation to pray.

Your brother is sinking fast and he needs help. John says that you can come to your brother's rescue. You can - you should! - pray. Your prayer is a concrete demonstration of love for your brother.

And what can you expect to happen when you pray for someone who is committing a sin not leading to death?

Your fervent prayer for your brother who is struggling with sin is a powerful weapon. You are not speaking to the ceiling. You are praying to God.

God will take your prayer and will use it to prick the conscience of your brother. God may use your prayer to remind him of His ways and to point him to His strength.

If your brother is receptive to the power of the Spirit that is unleashed through your prayer, and he turns from his sin, God will give him "**life**".⁵

You *should* by all means pray, and you *can* by all means pray with confidence that God will give your repentant brother the LIFE, here and now, that Jesus promised to those who walk with Him.

This is tremendous. Sin need not permanently sideline a Christian. Failure need not be fatal for the child of God.

Those who are sinking in sin can be rescued. Your prayer (and, of course, your fellowship and your support!) may be the lifeline that turns your brother from his sin and ushers him back into a vibrant, abundant LIFE with God.

⁵ As this passage is found at the end of 1 John, there is a parallel passage at the end of the book of James. James (Jesus' half-brother) writes of the efficacy of prayer, especially in the case of a Christian caught up in sin (5:16). He ends his book with the promise that [20]...*if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, [21] let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.* The similarities between this and John's words are striking. James' addition of the possibility of "**turning a sinner from the error of his way**" makes explicit what is implied, but not overtly stated in 1 John. See also Proverbs 10:2; 11:4; 11:19; 12:28.

If, though, you see a brother who is involved in sin that DOES lead to death, John has no explicit command for you. He doesn't tell you to pray about this.

For sin leading to death

Of course, to review, we're not exactly sure what a "*sin leading to death*" is. It may be the sin of doing great harm to Jesus' church, or it may be sinning intentionally or repetitively or seriously, or it may be something else entirely.

It may be that the original readers of this letter knew exactly what John meant. Sadly, we don't.

So, it's not likely that you or I will be able to say with certainty that this person is committing a sin leading to death.

And, since John doesn't say that we *shouldn't* pray for someone who is committing a sin leading to death, we are free to pray for them.

We can go ahead and do the praying, leaving the sorting out to God. It would be a hopeful, compassionate thing to pray for that Christian.⁶

After all, in Romans (2:4), the Apostle Paul writes of the kindness of God that leads us to repentance. So, there is always the hope that God will be kind and will lead this one to turn from his sin.

And if that happens, we can trust that our gracious and forgiving God will deal with them in grace, just like He did with those Ninevites in the days of Jonah (Jonah 4:2).

Conclusion:

John's letter isn't done. As you can see, there is the Benediction (vv. 18-21) yet to come. But this that we've just seen is the conclusion of the burden of the letter.

John has written to urge his Christian friends to holiness and love. Holding to truth, we are to abide in Jesus (obey His commands!) and love one another.

Those strands all come together as John writes about prayer.

Christians caught up in this or that sin (and what Christian doesn't struggle with certain sins?!) need help.

They're stuck in sin's quicksand and somebody better pull them out. They can't get themselves out.

Christians are often quick to help, and that's a good thing. Comfort and counsel and support are all important.

But what the struggling brother or sister needs above all else is God's help. And you, a Christian, can uniquely provide the help that your friend needs by prayer.

You have been loved perfectly by God, so you lovingly lift up your friend to God. You pray, trusting that God will do powerful things with your prayer in the life of your friend.

Prayer. It's not the only thing you can or should do. But bringing the power of God to bear on your friend's struggle is the most loving thing you do.

Brothers and sisters, let us love one another; let us pray for one another.

⁶ Jeremiah continued to pray for the apostate Jews of his day, even though God had told him that his prayers would not effect change; their doom was sealed. He prayed anyway. (Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11-12)

John's Benediction:

You and Sin: Protected (v. 18)

[18] We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him (or, "the one who is born of God keeps himself"), and the evil one does not touch him.

John certainly doesn't mean that Christians never commit sin. If that's what he means, what he has just said about prayer for sinning Christians makes no sense.

John is saying here that God's "seed" in the Christian is the controlling element of his born-again nature.

It is a great comfort to know that whatever our failures, they do not really touch who we are at the core of our being.

When we are most humbled by our sinful failures, we need to know that these lapses do not define us. We are God's children and the enemy cannot really touch us.

You and the World: IN A PITCHED BATTLE (v. 19)

[19] We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

There is evidence everywhere of the world's brokenness. It is tragic and undeniable. Satan is carrying out his mission of steal, kill and destroy with great success.

But we are not "of" the world. And it's not presumptuous or arrogant or braggadocious to say that.

It is simply true that we who believe in Jesus are God's active agents, sent on a search-and-rescue mission on behalf of those trapped by the enemy and his worldly schemes.

You and Jesus: SECURE IN HIM WHO IS THE TRUTH (vv. 20-21)

[20] 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. This is the true God and eternal life.

Christianity is a faith that is not based on philosophical speculation. It is sourced in history and revelation.

Jesus was born, lived, died, and rose again in first-century Palestine. The story is all true. This Jesus is the source of eternal life to all who believe. He is the **"true God."**

And this God will brook no rivals.

Idolatry

To know God is to know Him who is true. The God we now know by knowing Jesus stands in complete contrast to all false gods. They represent lies. Our God is the only true God.

Idolatry may be either metal or mental. And the Bible tells us that God's people have always been tempted by idols.

What John has written in this letter describes God and His ways, accurately. To embrace what he has said is to embrace truth. To reject it is to dive headfirst into idolatry.

[21] Little children, guard yourselves from idols.