



Speaker:
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Praying for the Brethren

◀ Series: John's Letters • 13 of 15 ▶

3/29/2020 (SUN) | Bible: **1 John 5:13-21**

Today, in our examination of John's first letter, we shall be concentrating on verses 13 to 21. We're at the end of the letter. What have we learned so far?

- We learned firstly that the apostles testified to both Jesus' divinity and his humanity.
- We saw that sin in us is described as threefold: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. This is how Satan takes advantage of us.
- We looked at what the term *antichrist* means. It was a term coined by John, through the Spirit, to describe those who deny the incarnation as we understand it.
- We saw that we are at the same time both perfect and rotten to the core.
- We learned about Jesus' sacrifice and how it should inspire us to sacrifice ourselves for the brethren.
- We were told that doctrines must be weighed against the scriptures. Held up to the standard of scripture.
- We saw of God that he is, among other things, a God of love, and one aspect of his love is brought to its fulfilment when we show love to other people.
- We've been taught that in Jesus Christ there are two natures: the divine and the human, although he remains as one person.
- We've seen Jesus presented to us as our sacrifice, and our representative in the courts of heaven. And last week, we looked at the meaning of the "water and the blood".
- And in all John's teaching, and this letter, he shows his care for the brethren. He also teaches them doctrine and encourages them to be "Doers of the word and not hearers only". Doers of the word.

We jump in today then at verse 13. We come across the principle of belief. Not just a belief in God, but particularly in Jesus Christ his Son. And not just trust in Jesus but more particularly on his *name*. His name. It's a reputation that was earned through his ministry. And that term "name" also carries with it very glorious things about the characteristics of Jesus himself. And it is not merely a belief *in* this "name that is above every name" but a belief *on* his name. The difference being, you could theoretically have an unbeliever who believes that Jesus existed, believes that what he said is what is told us in scripture, and also that he is even the saviour. But they may not care. Certainly, the devils believe, to the full!

The difference is that we believe through a proper faith. It is **faith**. If you look, it's all over this passage. In verse 13, "You that believe", "That you may know". Verse 14, "The confidence we have in him" and verse 15, "We know". There's also verses 18, 19 and 20. We know, we know, we know.

True faith is believing with complete certainty. It is trusting in Jesus Christ and all the promises that he makes. We see also at the start of verse thirteen that it talks about having knowledge of eternal life; rather, being *certain* of eternal life. And it is right for us to have confidence in the promise that

we shall live for ever. Rome's view is that to say such a thing counts as a sin of presumption. A sin of presumption.

I had a conversation with a colleague many years ago now. I thought an opportunity had arisen in a quiet time during the working day, and I just threw the question at her: "Can I ask, are you a Christian?" She looked horrified and said, "How can someone ask someone else that question? How can anyone know that they are a Christian?" You see she like most people believed that it's not a case of "Are you a Christian or are you not?" No: they see it as a spectrum with one end "Very Christian" and the other end "Not very Christian at all". And each of us sits somewhere on this spectrum according to our behaviour. Well, that is not biblical. And the reason she—the reason Rome—has that faulty view is that they assume that it's all based on works: that it is about what they can do to get themselves along that spectrum to the "good" end. Not for us. All our confidence is in him.

Let me read Romans 8 verses 15 and 16. It says, "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear. But ye have received the Spirit of adoption. Whereby we cry Abba Father, the Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." *We know*. So in that confidence we look forward to eternal life. We relish it!

Look at verse 14. If I could paraphrase that opening statement, it would be something like this: "Now regarding that confidence, that faith, this is the type of confidence we have:" And what example does he use? It goes on to talk about getting prayers answered. We ask God. He hears us. We get what we asked for. That is the confidence.

Now any Christian might object to that statement and say *Well, you know, in my experience and the experience of everyone else I know in the church, and my knowledge of church history, tells me the Christian life is full of unanswered prayer*. And so we get used to living with this, this sort of ten percent chance that what we ask for we will get. Well, the answer to that objection is that there are **conditions** to prayer. There are conditions. I'll give you just three of them.

The first one we can read about a few chapters back. We came across this verse in chapter 3 of John's first letter and verse 22 which says, "Whatsoever we ask we receive of him because we keep his commandments and do those things that are pleasing in his sight." So **obedience** then is a requirement. To come to God in a state of disobedience and ask for something is surely the height of arrogance. You can imagine a spoiled teenager, swearing and shouting and verbally abusing his mother and father, then ending the tirade and saying to them "You couldn't give me some money, could you? I need to go out." Well if people go to God and they're disobedient, it's the same thing.

Here's another requirement, found James 1 verses 5 and 6: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him; but let him ask in faith, nothing wavering, for he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed." So **faith** is required. When we pray to God and frame our prayers to make them sound good, don't forget that God can read between the lines. He hears a different prayer from the one that comes out of your mouth. So when you say *Lord I'm praying for [this spiritual thing]* and so on, what God hears is *I'm asking for this thing but, you know, maybe you will or won't answer. Sometimes you keep your promises, sometimes you don't. And I don't even know if you could do this thing—it's quite hard*. That's what God hears. A faithless prayer. And he quite rightly just closes his ears to such a prayer.

Here's a third condition, also in James—chapter 4, verse 3: "Ye ask and receive not because you ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lust." So the condition is that our prayers have to be

made up of **holy requests**. We can't just say we'd like a new car, a bigger house or something. But what of spiritual requests though? Are they always sanctified? The ones that sound "churchy"? They have to be accordance of the word. I read in scripture that the Lord does not keep his church free from illness and disease and infirmity. I read in Scripture that he *sends* hardships in the form of ill health to his own people, to try them and to force them to their knees in prayer or for some other reason. So when a believer says "Lord, I know it's your will that we should all be well. I pray that for you to heal the whole church of everything", I conclude that it's a wrong request. Or if I read in scriptures (as I do) that the Lord has his elect and those that are not. That there is a narrow way to eternal life, and few find it; and there's a broad way which leads to eternal destruction, and most find it. Knowing that, why would I come out with a prayer like "Lord save every individual in Liverpool. I pray in the name of Jesus that you would save everyone by tonight." Those are the type of prayers that go on. They happen. And they're contradictory to the word.

And so we still have to be careful if our requests are—outwardly, anyway—spiritual. So, the conditions for prayer:

- We have to be in obedience to God
- We have to pray believing
- We have to make our requests legitimate

If we look at verse 16, we'll get an idea of a legitimate type of prayer from the Bible itself. John has reminded us that we have this amazing privilege. A privilege, that God beckons us to come to him and pray, and he says *Everything that you want, I've got it right here. Approach me, and I'll give you this thing here. Which one do you want? Do you want this or do you want that? It's **all** ready for you!*

Storehouses of grace! And he wants to give to us. What, then, does John use as an example? What we can do with that great privilege? Well, we shouldn't be surprised. He says you could, for example...pray for the brethren! Yes, pray for the brethren. It ties in with his message of loving the brethren.

Let's see our two-fold duty towards the brethren. We help them in person, directly. And then we help them indirectly by going to God and praying on their behalf. And just to remind you, God is happy, God is *happy*, to really include us in his purposes by praising us for our victories. Praising us for overcoming.

Again in James and in chapter 5 there are a couple of examples. James 5 verse 15 says, "And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up. And if he has committed sins they shall be forgiven him." Our prayers accomplish that. And then in verse 20 of the same chapter, "Let him know that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death." This is amazing. This is God saying, *Well done for doing that. Well done.* And then we stand there, don't we, amazed as we accept God's praise and thankyou. AND THEN WE CAST OUR CROWNS AT HIS FEET BY ASCRIBING IT **ALL** TO HIM. The glory that came from God returns to him.

So the contents of this sort of prayer. We see a brother or sister sin, so we pray for their spiritual healing. We ask for restoration—for deliverance. God promises to give that person the spiritual life they need for this healing. So go ahead brothers and sisters; in confidence pray for such a thing. But with these two notes of caution.

1. Be careful when you pray for another's sin that your prayer is not **arrogant**. If I had a particular position that I took on some scriptures like the Book of Revelation, well, I wouldn't go to God and say *Lord, you know that you've revealed to me the true interpretation. I pray*

that you would just destroy all these other teachings. That's not right, is it?

In a former church of mine, head covering for women was practiced. They received some lady visitors one day to the prayer meeting from another evangelical church. These ladies came from a church that took a different position on head covering, a different interpretation. An old man of the church stood up in the prayer meeting and said, *Lord God, I pray that you would convict these women sitting here without head coverings. Convict them Lord of their rebellion against you, I pray.* Wow!

So we can have arrogant prayers like this, you know, like the prayer of the publican in the temple. He was praying to God. He was thanking God! But his prayer was wrong. It was arrogant.

2. And another caution about praying for other sins is you should ensure that you pray a hundred times more for your own sin than for the sin of others. In the same way, **you should in every way focus far more on your own sin than the sin of others.** You should assume that you sin more than everyone else.

Curiously, in verse 16 we come across this notion of a sin that leads to death. Some situation where we're not urged to pray. That's unusual. Some sin that leads inevitably to death, presumably the second death. Some think that this refers to the unforgivable sin. That if you see someone commit that particular sin—or what you perceive as a committal of that sin by them—that you should immediately cease to pray for them. Well, I respect that view, but I disagree with it. I'm more inclined to think that this has to do with **apostasy**. The position of one who has professed Christ but returns to his old ways. John says "I do not say that you should pray for that person."

I want you to consider Jesus praying as recorded by John. Jesus was praying to his father. And he said to his Father, "I don't pray for the world. I only pray for my people." Now I think it's perfectly fair to extend this. To broaden that to not just his followers in that day versus the people in the world of that day, but say that today **the Lord only prays to his Father on behalf of the elect, and not on behalf of the reprobates.**

However, Jesus knew who the elect and reprobate were. Hence the prayer. We don't! We don't know. This is why we have no option but to go to God in prayer on behalf of friends and relatives, and we have no idea whether they are God's elect or not. But we pray for them cautiously saying, *Lord, I want you to have mercy on this person; nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.*

But for us, I mean can we ever be sure someone is reprobate? Well, I think sometimes we can: in the case of an apostate. These are people who the Bible describes as dogs "returning to their own vomit". It says that they are people who "trample" Jesus's blood underfoot. They would have him die again to redeem them a second time. People who would have been better off never being born! Such is the dreadful position of the apostate.

So who are the apostates, then? Those who profess to belong to Jesus, but then sin brazenly. Okay, Christians sin. Sometimes the sins of Christians can be quite terrible. But when a genuine believer sins, it is marked by a repentance which follows. They sin *despite* their new nature. Think about Paul's description of his sin. He said the desire to obey God and do these good things is with him. But how to actually just go and *do* them, he just didn't find! He ended up doing the opposite!

Let me give you an example. If I said one day, "Look folks: I'm really into these particular sins X, Y and Z. I know you're shocked. They are horrible, but I'll just be honest with you: I don't really care what God thinks. I just don't care. And if you are concerned about that, I'm not too bothered about that either, to be honest. I want to go and do these things and I just don't care anymore about what God thinks. Let him do to me what he wants. I'm going to do it anyway." Such a person should be avoided. We should stay away from them. Have nothing to do with them. And for us, we keep ourselves, by God's power. We just we just hold on.

And so there are cases perhaps that we might come across where we see someone sinning so brazenly in the face of God that it betrays their profession of faith, and we know that they are sinning a sin unto death. And we stop praying for them. You might find it hard to accept. And we might never come across such a situation, but it is there for us to be mindful of.

In verses 18, 19 and 20, as we come to the end of the letter, we have a set of verses starting with "We know..." And it's almost a mini statement of faith. And the three things that they state could perhaps be summarized like this:

1. Verse 18 speaks about *perfection* in Christ. Perfection in Christ *today*. Paul again said "It's not me that sins—it's sin living in me." *It's not me*. In 2 Corinthians 5 and verse 17 it says, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature." A brand-new creation. "Old things are passed away. Behold, all things are become new." The true believer desires sinlessness. The turmoil is from the deathly influence of your own self versus the sanctifying effect of the Spirit. So we must encourage the spirit.
2. In v.19 we can say that it's about our *separation* in Christ. Our separation in Christ.
 - a. We belong to a different family to the world
 - b. We live in a different country
 - c. We have different desires
 - d. We don't love this world—we want it gone
 - e. We have a different prince over us. That verse can be alternatively translated as "The whole world lies in the power of the wicked one." That's Satan. **People either have allegiance to the Prince of Peace or the Prince of Chaos.** There is no other way. You are subject to one or the other.
3. And in verse 20 we see the third principle: Our *understanding* in Christ. It's like we've been given this new spiritual intelligence and it's superior to any IQ that we might have according to our nature. I mean after all, God dispenses to his church low intelligence, average intelligence, and high intelligence, and he dispenses it that way for his own reasons. But we're now talking about a wisdom that exceeds the wisdom of this world. Jesus said in Matthew 13 and verse 11, to his followers, "...because it is given to *you* to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. But to others it is not given." And in 2 Corinthians again, in chapter 4 and verse 6 it says, "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in *our hearts* to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

We know Jesus Christ is the Son of God. We know him personally, as our saviour, our friend and our brother. And Jesus said that he was the way the truth and the life.

- He is the only *way* because he's the redeemer of his people, and if you don't follow Jesus you'll be lost.

- He is the *truth*. It says in verse 20 “Him that is true.” He is all truth.
- And he is the *life*. Also in verse 20. He is the life. It says that IN JESUS is found eternal life.

Is this not a most glorious message? Not one you want to be declared as widely as possible for as long as you live? Are you not thrilled in the least by this gospel? According to your faith, you will be moved by the very mention of the name of Jesus Christ.

We must finish. John says farewell to us for now. Verse 21: he signs off in a very characteristic fashion. We've seen him switch between warm phrases to doctrine to hard-hitting statements. And he signs off with “Little children who I love”. Little children who I love...KEEP YOURSELF FROM IDOLS. Keep yourself away from Idols. This is meant for us. This is meant for you and for me. We have to keep ourselves from anything that distracts us from the person of Jesus Christ and his service. So I pray as we come to a close that you might think on this in the week ahead. Look to nothing else, and no one else, but the lovely Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.