

Distinguishing Marks of Believers

1 John 5:16–21

August 6, 2017

Our students have been reading and discussing Jackie Crowe’s excellent book, *This Changes Everything*. She begins the book with a helpful analogy. Things change when a sibling is born or you get a job or graduate from school. *Things change* but not *everything* changes. Those kinds of things affect certain aspects of your life. The job involves 9–6 and graduation certifies academic achievement. But life continues with a little wrinkle here or there by these temporal events of life. But not everything changes.

Yet when we come to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ *everything changes*. That’s why John can write, “He who has the Son *has the life*; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:12, italics added). It’s why Paul declares, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is a new creature*; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17, italics added). Peter explains this as an act of God’s great mercy that “has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet 1:3). Consequently, he says that it’s just like we’re “newborn babies,” like “aliens and strangers” in this world (2:1; 11).

That’s a far cry from the occasional pew sitter that has jumped through a few religious hoops to satisfy himself that he is a Christian, while knowing nothing of this new birth, new creation life. *Knowing God through Christ changes everything*. But what does that look like?

John spells out this kind of Christ-transforming life to counter the gnostic-inclined former members of the Ephesus church that had left with a swagger and determined antipathy to the revelation of God in Christ. They denied Jesus as the Son of God that came in the flesh; they rejected the necessity of the God-Man atoning for sin at the cross; they substituted a mysterious religious knowledge for faith in Christ [I. H. Marshall, *NICNT: The Epistles of John*, 253–254]. Yes, they were different in the way that they lived in relationship to others and to God—different than Christ’s followers. But not with the kind of difference that Jesus Christ through the gospel makes in all who trust in Him.

John ends this letter by identifying five changes that mark those transformed by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Jesus changes relationship toward others

One of the great hallmarks of John’s Gospel and Epistles is his emphasis on loving one another. He quotes Jesus who said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). In contrast, John tells us, “The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. . . . The one who does not love [implication is love God and one another] does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 2:9; 4:8). Positively, he writes, “Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (4:7).

This kind of love aims to serve others; it notices needs and seeks to remedy them; it looks for ways to encourage and spur others to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24). But in the context of our passage, John shows another angle of the way that we love one another. Our relationship toward others has been so changed by Christ that we intercede in prayer for our brothers and sisters.

He has already told us that the confidence of one in Christ is found around God's throne, so that "if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 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" (5:14–15). Now he applies it.

The believer sees and prays

Three uses of *if* seem to show a progression (vv. 14–16): if we ask God hears; if we know that God hears we receive; Since we receive from Him then, if we see our brother committing a sin we pray. Love calls for action. John proceeds to give an example of how this is worked out in practice. **"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."** Because of the new life in Christ, the Christian sees his brother or sister's weaknesses and failures in a different way. Instead of squashing or ridiculing or shaking a head at them he intercedes for them. His aim is restoration and renewed fellowship not trampling on in pride. John Calvin explains, that instead of gossip or slander or even ignoring a brother in sin, God "would also have us to regard the falls of the brethren as stimulants to prayer" [*Calvin's Commentaries*, 22:267].

Yet to be effective in praying for one another we must *see others through eyes of love*. The word **"sees"** means that he catches sight of it or notices it [*horao*; BDAG]. It's not that he's on the hunt to try to find a speck in a brother's eye while ignoring the log in his own eye (Matt 7:3). It's not about the arrogance of legalism that seeks to conform others to a faulty standard of righteousness. But rather in the ongoing interaction of relationship the Christian notices that her fellow believer has fallen into some pattern of sin. Grieved over it, she doesn't pick up the phone to tell someone else, but rather, she seeks the face of the Lord. And God promises to **"give life to those who commit sin not leading to death,"** i.e. to restore to the sweetness of lively fellowship with the Lord.

A distinguishing kind of praying

John specifies that the praying regards **"sin not leading to death."** Now, he doesn't want us to adopt the Roman Catholic practice of dividing sins into venial and mortal sins, the former that's not a big deal but the latter sinks you. He writes, **"all unrighteousness is sin,"** so whatever breaks God's law and whatever runs contrary to the character of God is sin. Sometimes a brother or sister falls into such sins that rob the sweetness of fellowship with Christ and His body (1:3). He calls this **"a sin not leading to death."** So pray for your brother for deliverance.

But then John adds, **"There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this."** As a number of writers point out, John doesn't forbid praying for such but he indicates that it may be a waste of time.

So what kind of sin is he talking about that leads to death? If we think **"death"** is used in a literal life/death manner, then we must contend with what particular sin will literally kill a person. And who commits the sin? Is it a believer who commits a particular sin or sins and then God immediately takes him, such as happened with Ananias and Saphira? That passage is often considered as applicable.

But I think that we have to consider the context when interpreting this passage or else we're left trying to figure out what line must not be crossed under penalty of death. What was the issue that brought about this letter in the first place? There were some who

professed to know Christ who not only left the fellowship of the church but who also denied the deity and humanity of Christ by denying that He was sent by God, rejected the need for His atoning work, and saw no reason to trust in Christ. What had they done? They had called God a liar by rejecting His testimony concerning His Son (5:10). Having tasted the good things of God under the preaching of the gospel, they had rejected it and spurned it and taken an offensive posture against it just like the Pharisees. They had gone too far. As Jesus explained, they had sinned against the Holy Spirit and would not be pardoned.

So did that refer to Christians committing such sin? No but rather it refers to those who at one point professed to be Christians but were not, who in defiance and utter rejection, turned against Christ and the gospel with loathing and arrogance.

Is it for us to decide who has committed a sin unto death? I think that Calvin's counsel is the best approach. "But as this very seldom happens [sin unto death], and as God sets before us the infinite riches of his grace, and bids us to be merciful according to his own example, we ought not rashly to conclude that any one has brought on himself the judgment of eternal death; on the contrary, love should dispose us to hope well" [22:270].

2. Jesus changes thought and practice

Returning to his position in chapter 3 concerning the believer's practice regarding sin, John repeats, "**We know that no one who is born of God sins,**" or literally, continues in sin or goes on sinning. The new birth affects our thought and practice. We're new creations in Christ who cannot and will not live as we lived before. While unbelief allows us to live carelessly regarding sin, the new birth with the well spring of living water flowing through us, battles against carelessness with sin.

Does that mean that the Christian quits sinning? Rather it means that he seeks by the grace of God to sin less and less until that day that he stands whole and complete before Christ. He sees what sin cost the Lord that he loves. He sees how sin divides relationships and plagues the mind and wrecks families and destroys congregations. So he fights it, clothed in the armor of God. He disciplines himself for the purpose of godliness.

But if left strictly to himself, he will not make it despite every effort. So John gives the assurance, "**But He who was born of God [Jesus!] keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.**" Jesus will not let him go. He will not forsake or abandon those He has redeemed at such a cost. He keeps us, so He is the sentinel watching over us lest we fall into the depths of sin and rebellion.

Why didn't He keep those that left and followed after false teaching? One simple reason, they did not belong to Him.

Jesus keeps the one who is His own, "**and the evil one does not touch him.**" Satan might tempt, oppress, and attack but he cannot sever that one redeemed by Jesus from the grip of Christ. "My sheep hear My voice," Jesus said, "and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28–29).

But here is no weakened "once saved, always saved" passage. He keeps us so that we will not continue in the same ways of sin and rebellion. He keeps us to be a holy people before Him, to love Him with all of our hearts, and to obey His voice and follow Him.

3. Jesus changes the way that we look at security

How does the world view security? It evaluates its wealth, possessions, armaments, political strategies, and walls to determine security. Yet the world's security cannot protect from Satan's power or death.

During WWII, an officer traveling with William Donovan, the director of the OSS—precursor to the CIA, asked how he could go into so many dangerous places without fear, knowing that if captured he would be tortured to secure information. Donovan explained that he carried a cyanide pill that he could bite and immediately die. But while keeping him from torture, the cyanide pill would not keep him from death. He lacked security.

But John writes of an unrelenting security, **“We know that we are of [ek] God,”** and then he shows the contrast, **“and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”** John has used that phrase before, “We are from [ek] God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” (4:4). While their opponents held to popularity and power, they had no security. They were lying in the power of the devil. As Rob Plummer expands the translation, “The wicked, rebellious world—whether it realizes it or not, is reclining in the intimate grasp of the devil” [*Daily Dose of Greek*, 1 John 5:19].

Those that Christ has saved can make the bold confession: *we are of God*. That's not brashness, as though *our* views make us right with God; or with smugness, as though God ought to be happy to have us; or with presumption, as though just living and breathing means that we're of God. It's a confession rooted in the work of Christ. We're of God only because God sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (4:10). He removed the curse and the judgment at the price of the bloody death of His Son; He caused us to be born again by the work of the Spirit; He gave us grace to repent and believe the good news of Christ; He adopted us into His family as His own children. So with joy, thankfulness, and great humility we can say, **“We know that we are of God.”** Our security doesn't rest in the temporal and tangible things of this world but in the grace of God shown to us in Jesus Christ.

4. Jesus changes our relationship with God

For the third sentence in a row, John uses the term of certainty and assurance so endearing in this letter, **“We know.”** We know that those belonging to God have a changed disposition regarding sin. We know that due to the work of Christ we belong to God. Now, **“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.”** Unlike those that abandoned the faith that never took root to pursue their gnostic-flavored religious practice, **“This is the true God and eternal life.”**

Here is the very heart of Christian assurance. First, **“the Son of God has come,”** so the Father sent the Son on a redemptive mission to pursue those that He would recover from the evil one's power through the cross (4:9–10). Second, this same One who has come by the Holy Spirit **“has given us understanding,”** and here's why, **“so that we may know Him who is true.”** There's no self-glorying or boasting or figuring out this gospel-thing. God sent the Son who has given those whose minds and understanding were darkened by sin the understanding in order to believe who Jesus is and what Jesus has done in His redemptive work. God gets the glory for pursuing us through Christ.

Third, this understanding is so that **“we may know Him who is true.”** That’s the knowledge of relationship, the experience of entering into the intimacy of belonging to Him. Instead of hanging our faith on a cooked-up version of a god, we’ve been given spiritual understanding to know the true God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, this relationship is described in terms of *union with God*. **“And we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ.”** Union means that His life is our life; His joy is our joy; His peace is our peace; His righteousness is our righteousness. Charles Haddon Spurgeon explained it like this:

Remember that *he sees us now in Christ*. . . . He sees us in Christ to have died, in him to have been buried, and in him to have risen again. As the Lord Jesus Christ is well-pleasing to the Father, so in him are we well-pleasing to the Father also. For our being in him identifies us with him. If, then, our acceptance with God stands on the footing of Christ’s acceptance with God, it standeth firmly, and is an unchanging argument with the Lord God for doing us good. . . . Firmly believe that until the Lord rejects Christ he cannot reject his people; until he repudiates the atonement and the resurrection, he cannot cast away any of those with whom he has entered into covenant in the Lord Jesus Christ [MTP, 35:547, cited Reeves & Chester, *Why the Reformation Still Matters*, 123].

Fifth, this union with God has come through Christ: it is **“in His Son Jesus Christ.”** And who is He? **“This [One] is the true God and eternal life.”** Without equivocation, John calls Jesus, noted by the demonstrative pronoun, the true God [take that you Jesus-denying heretics!] and is in Himself *eternal life*. That’s why he declared that union with Jesus is *life* (5:12). He’s not a lesser god, a *demiurge* in the language of the gnostics, but God Himself. To know Him is to discover that He is eternal life.

So if you think that Christianity and all of this talk about Jesus is to make you feel secure in your own religious beliefs and your own desires, think again. The gospel is about Jesus as our life. And believing this gospel unites us to Jesus as our life. *And that changes everything.*

5. Jesus changes our pursuits

John closes with what might appear to be an odd sentence. He doesn’t give a concluding blessing or good-bye as we find common in Paul. But he offers a little exhortation. **“Little children, guard yourselves from idols.”** Ephesus was known for its idolatry. As one writer put it, they had “gods to be feared, gods to be appeased, gods to be honored, gods to whom sacrifices were due, gods whose meal was to be shared by the worshiper” [P. W. Comfort, “Idolatry,” *DPL*, 424–426]. Those leaving the church followed after idols—for anything that turns us away from Jesus Christ alone as our life, is an idol. So John tells them **“guard yourselves from idols,”** be on the lookout for the deceitful snares of idolatry that can appear in the shape of material things, concepts, ideologies, false beliefs, self-trust, and worldly confidence.

So refuse spiritual passivity. With union with Christ leading to communion with Him, as Richard Sibbes explained, that never promotes coasting spiritually [Reeves & Chester, 117]. Actively guard yourselves from idols. As little children eager to learn, ready to follow the One they love and admire, keep your pursuits focused on what pleases Christ and not on what would turn you from Him. Yes, He keeps you but not to breed laziness, rather to enable you to faithfully pursue the things that honor Him.

Knowing God through Christ changes everything. Is that the way that you understand and practice the Christian faith? Are you marked by change in relationships with others? Change in thoughts and practices? Change in the way that you look at security? Change in relationship to God? Change in your pursuits? The Apostle John, from start to finish, shows us life in Christ. Let us never be content within anything less than knowing Him who is eternal life.