

A Final Instruction 1 John 5:18-21
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When we write a letter, how we choose to end it can be very important. Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1979-90, had a rather cool relationship with Queen Elizabeth. The beginning of the problem may have been a thank you note Mrs. Thatcher sent to the queen. Instead of ending with the rather customary "Your humble and obedient servant," it simply ended with "Sincerely yours, Margaret Thatcher." The queen was miffed, apparently thinking that Iron Lady had not shown proper respect in the letter's conclusion. Friends, for the past few months we have studied the book of 1 John. It is a letter written by the Apostle John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to first century Christians, and for Christians at all times and places, including Northern Minnesota in 2017. We now come to the end of the letter. Our text this morning is 1 John 5:18-21. Notice this letter does not end with "Sincerely Yours, John," nor with "Your humble and obedient servant." Rather **1 John 5:21** (HCSB) says, "*Little children, guard yourselves from idols.*"

Now, this conclusion is a little surprising, because it's the first time John mentions idols in this letter. Perhaps this verse is a P.S., an afterthought that he forgot to include. Or maybe John intentionally saved this big concern for the end of his correspondence. That would be like the college student who writes a three-page letter to mom and dad giving all sorts of details about college life and concludes, "P.S. Please send me \$500.00 immediately." Yet, I tend to think John's exhortation to avoid idols is a culmination of what the whole letter is about. Thus friends, even if you missed the entire sermon series you can still catch John's main point this morning. John's focus has been to encourage us to live as true Christians, genuine believers. This certainly means we should "Guard ourselves from idols." Friends, let's pause and pray as we look at God's word, He would make us better able to do just that.

In verses 18-20 we find important reminders of how to avoid idolatry. Before we consider those verses, I want to make sure we

understand what an idol is. Often, we think of idols as wood, stone or metal statues that

represent pagan deities. As we read the Old Testament we see people worshiping these type of gods, which are really not gods at all. In the first century, there were plenty of folks in the Roman empire where John lived worshiping these types of idols. Even today, many people sometimes pray to a statue before they go to bed. There are 330 million gods in the Hindu religion, which has about one billion adherents in the world. It is amazing that in Japan, one of the most educated nations on the globe, millions of people bow down to statues of Buddha. John was certainly concerned that first century Christians would not start worshiping idols made of wood, stone, and metal like so many of their neighbors and even family members did.

However, I think John also wants us to realize that idol worship can include much more than this. Idolatry is worshiping anyone or anything other than the true God. We are guilty of idolatry whenever we break the first of the Ten Commandments. "You shall have no other Gods before me." When another "god" comes before the true God, when something becomes more important to us than God, we are guilty of idol worship. That is why the NLT translates **5:21** this way, *Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.*

Friends, there are a lot of different idols around us. There might not be 330 million, but there are many different things people put ahead of God. Sometimes houses, cars, and boats become idols. We might not go out in the garage and bow down to the car before we go to bed, but some folks value a possession or possessions more than they do God. For others, the primary object of their attention and really their worship is a job, their career, or their education. Any type of addiction, whether it is to alcohol, pornography, shopping or cable news is really an idol. For some people, hobbies or sports become the focus of their life. An important job of parents is to help

their children to remember that baseball, basketball, soccer are wonderful activities, but they are not the most important things in life, and they are not nearly as important as God. Some of the most common idols in our culture are family and friends. We have a tendency to put other people on pedestals and treat them and their opinions as more important than God's. That is idolatry. "But, Pastor Dan, isn't it good to be devoted to my family and friends?" Yes, it is, but remember, as Tim Keller says, "Good things make the best idols." When your devotion to those people is greater than your devotion to God, that is idolatry. To love your spouse, more than you love God is idolatry. And it really is not good for your marriage.

Yet, the idol or false god which attracts the most worshipers today is probably "self." Many people love themselves more than they love God. We often would like to be the center of the universe. One of Teddy Roosevelt's sons once said of him, "Father wants to be the bridegroom at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral." My health, my pleasure, my sense of fulfillment, that is what is really important, right? Some believe the only person worth loving is yourself. In fact, some folks talk about "marrying themselves" "sologamy." "Me" often replaces God as the focus of worship. I once saw some graffiti which read, "Eric is god." Now I don't know if Eric is a real nice fellow or a total creep. Yet, he certainly is not god. Those words are idolatry. Most folks are not that blunt with their egotism, but more than a few think they are God's gift to the world.

It is disturbing to look around us and see how God is ignored and not worshiped as He ought to be. Yet, even more disturbing is the realization that all the idolatry is not out there. There is idolatry in the church, even within Chisholm Baptist Church. In fact, I suspect even during the past week, many of us have been guilty of, at some point, pushing God to the side and treating someone or something a more important than Him. Thus, friends, John's warning to guard ourselves from idols is very relevant for us. Yet, it is a warning we often fail to heed. So, what should we do? Well, we should not beat up ourselves. To sit and wallow in guilt over our lack of devotion to

God is more of a pagan response than a Christian one. If we are guilty of idolatry, we need to confess that sin, repent, and experience the forgiveness the Lord freely offers in Jesus. Yet, each of us needs to ask ourselves: How can I avoid idolatry? How can I keep this thing or this person from being more important to me than God? In the verses 5:18-20, John sums up his letter in three points. I believe he also spells out what we must do if we are to avoid becoming idol worshipers.

5:18-20 We know that everyone who has been born of God does not sin, but the One who is born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and the whole world is under the sway of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know the true One. We are in the true One—that is, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Okay, three things we need to do to follow John's last instructions and guard ourselves from idols.

Number one, as Christians we must remember we are free from sin's power. The NLT reads *5:18a We know that God's children do not make a practice of sinning*. That is very similar to what John said in 3:9. A genuine Christian does not continue to practice sin. This certainly includes the sin of idolatry. John is not talking about 100%, pure, total perfection. Rather, he is talking about a life which is in general, characterized by obedience to God. Steph Curry is one of the best players in the NBA, not because he makes every shot he takes, but because he makes many shots and scores about half the time he shoots. If he never made a shot he would not be playing basketball in the NBA. A person who never obeys God, who always puts something ahead of God, gives no evidence of being a genuine Christian. Throughout this letter, John has reminded us that claiming to be a Christian and being a Christian can be two very different things. It is possible to be a nice person, go to church, get baptized, even repeat a prayer and still not be a Christian. A genuine Christian is someone who by God's grace, is born of God, born again and trusts in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Friend, if you look at your life and find many things are more important to you than God, the first step is examine your faith in Jesus to

make sure it is real. If you are able to say, “Yes, it is. I am trusting in Jesus Christ, I know I am a Christian.” Then you can be confident that the Lord will enable you to become free from Idolatry and worship Him alone. Maybe you are thinking, “Pastor Dan, I have always loved myself more than God. I cannot change that.” Friend, that is not true. It is what Satan wants you to believe, but it is not true. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God’s Spirit dwells inside of you and helps you become a person who worships God and no one or nothing else. Oh, it is not always easy. Some of those idols can have very tight grips on our hearts. Yet, by God’s grace, we can find freedom.

That is the point John makes in the second part of **5:18b** *...but the One who is born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.* Or as the NLT puts it **5:18b** *...for God’s Son holds them (Christians, us) securely, and the evil one cannot touch them.* Through His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, the Lord Jesus keeps us from sin in general and idolatry in particular. This doesn’t mean we can lay on the couch and wait for God to zap us and make us holy. The Lord doesn’t want us to be couch potato Christians. Yet, as we seek to obey God, we can be certain that through the Holy Spirit, the Lord is working in our lives, making it possible for us to live in a way that pleases Him. When we feel it is too hard to follow Jesus, when we are tempted to give up, John says, “Don’t do that. Through Jesus, keep going, keep striving to honor Him. The Lord will protect you from both sin and Satan.”

Number two, to avoid idolatry we must learn to be separate from the world. **5:19** *We know that we are of God, and the whole world is under the sway of the evil one.* John likes to make clear distinctions and sometimes use hyperbole. We are either of God or part of a world which is under the sway of the devil. In chapter 2, John told us we must not identify with the evil world system. Folks, one of the reasons many of us fall into idolatry is because we do not heed what the Apostle Paul says in **Romans 12:2a** *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.* Far too often we let the world squeeze us into its mold. Last Sunday we closed the worship service with a song by Casting Crowns, entitled, “Prayer for a Friend.” It talked

about someone who had become a puppet of the world, and yet didn’t even realize it: Because he was unable to see the strings. Folks, in our culture today those strings may be hard to see, but they are very real. Way too frequently we adopt worldly attitudes, values, and priorities. Thus, our sense of what is really important is not shaped by God’s truth. While the Bible tells us clearly that God is most important, the world’s media, music, and educational system often proclaim that money, sex, and power are the things that matter the most. And they frequently tell us that the three most important people in the world are me, myself, and I.

So that world system, under the influence of the evil one, is putting on a full court press, doing everything it can to encourage us to be idolaters. It wants us to be people who try to deny God His rightful place in the universe. Now, I am not claiming there is any great conspiracy going on. I don’t think television network producers meet and discuss, “How can we turn people into idol worshippers?” Yet, that is the result if we adopt the values which are communicated through much of the media. For example, the media spends a lot of time promoting its own celebrities, such as movie and music stars. In fact, there was, maybe still is, a television show called “Movie Star Idol.” If I took a survey and asked people who they would like to meet: Jonny Depp, Lady Gaga, or Jesus Christ, what do you think their response would be? I don’t think Jesus would get anyplace near 100%. There are others who think Steph Curry or Tom Brady or Aaron Rodgers are more exciting than Jesus Christ.

Friends, for many years churches like ours thought that worldliness meant someone would drink, smoke, chew, or go with girls who do. Certainly, those things involve worldly attitudes. But it is possible to never do any of those things and still be a worldly person. What ought to separate us as Christians from the world is the fact we give God His rightful place. There is nothing more important than to know and honor the Lord.

Number three, to avoid idolatry we must focus our lives on Jesus Christ. **5:20** *And we know that the Son of God has come, and he has given us understanding so that we can know the true God. And now we live in fellowship with the true God*

because we live in fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only true God, and he is eternal life. There are many verses in the Bible that imply Jesus is truly God, but this verse, at least in most versions is an explicit affirmation that He, Jesus, is the only true God. In summing up his letter, John never wants us to forget the profound impact Jesus Christ has had on human history and upon his life as an individual. When I was growing up there were all sorts of things I found really exciting, but which don't thrill me anymore. A rocking horse was great until I rode a real horse. I loved to peddle my tricycle around, but now I certainly prefer to drive a Hyundai Sonata. Eating Big Macs at McDonald's was my favorite meal when I was in college, but now I certainly prefer Valentini's. Friends, I believe when you truly know Jesus Christ, you will have no more desire to worship an idol than you have to drive a tricycle to work.

I think this is one of the most neglected, but powerful truths of scripture. As C.S. Lewis says, "The problem is not that God finds our desires too large, but rather they are too small." We are content to devote ourselves to idols when we have the opportunity to be devoted to Jesus Christ, the true God. We strive for money, power, and pleasure, newer cars, bigger houses, and faster boats, when God offers a relationship with Himself through Jesus Christ. Friends, it would make a lot more sense for me to trade in my Sonata for a tricycle than for me to desire anything or anyone else above Jesus Christ. I believe that. The trouble is that even though I believe it, many times I still choose to put something or someone ahead of Jesus Christ. Many of my friends do the same thing.

Why do we make this foolish mistake? I think the reason is this: we don't fully understand and appreciate what it means to know Jesus. I remember a kid in school, it must have been a first grader, who would trade dimes for nickels because

he thought the smaller dimes were worth less than the nickels. To choose anything above Jesus Christ shows that we underestimate the value of knowing Him. We underestimate because we don't really know Jesus as we should. Thus, the focus of our lives needs to be getting to know Him better. How do we get to know Jesus? Bible study, prayer, going to church, are all helpful and need to be part of our lives. As we do those things we need to focus on Jesus in such a way that we grasp His glory, His power, His grace, His love, in greater ways. As that happens, the temptation to trade dimes for nickels, to put anything else ahead of Jesus, will grow weaker and weaker.

John's final instruction is that Christians must guard themselves from idols, and instead that we give Jesus Christ His rightful place in our lives. I think John would say, "If you do that, I really don't care if you remember anything else in the whole letter. Folks, I have served as the senior pastor here at Chisholm Baptist Church for almost twenty-four years. I have preached about 1,200 sermons from this pulpit. Yet, I would be very satisfied if you would simply follow the instructions John gives and keep yourself from idols. Nothing would give me greater joy than to be able to say, Chisholm Baptist Church is full of people who trust, follow and worship Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.

So, friends, your assignment today, is to by God's grace, start tearing down any idols you have in your life. Identify anyone or anything in your life that is sometimes more important to you than the Lord. Ask Him to help you lose your affection for that idol. Ask Him to help you stop loving it more than you should. Then ask the Lord to give you wisdom as to what steps you should take to make sure that thing or person never stands between you and God again. Friends, remember, nothing in life is more important or brings greater joy than being a loyal worshiper of God and God alone.