

## "WHO'S IN CHARGE?"



## "Who's in Charge" - 1 John 5:13-21

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**1 John 5:** (14) *Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.* (15) *And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.* (16) *If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not*

*leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.* (17) *All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.* (18) *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.* (19) *We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.* (20) *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.* (21) *Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.*

In the mediums of things like Mathematics and much of science, there are fundamental precepts that are accepted as absolutes... 'laws' if you will. Principles that result in the same answer every time the question is asked, the numbers are added, or the items combined. While seldom are people and the practice of spiritual disciplines so clean cut, there are indeed many universal outcomes in the practice of faith as well as just the general living of life on this planet.

Now as human beings, many of us will dispute that stance, and will in fact spend literally their whole lives struggling to prove the spiritual equivalent of 2 plus 2 is 5, or finding the absolute end of PI. It is most often useless to try to wave them off from such an endeavor, because the result of pride is always the dark of blindness. But yet in ministry it is ours to try, as it was John's in his day. And according to John, there is something we can do.

Throughout this letter, the apostle John has been driving home truths that we as Christians can know for certain. Things we can "take to the bank." Notice I said *can*, not *will*. Some will cover these truths repeatedly in their lifetimes, maybe even acknowledging them as truth, and yet never live them out. Paul said in 1 Timothy 2:3-4 "*This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved **and** to come to a knowledge of the truth.*" So apparently the two do not necessarily go hand in hand!

John began the letter sighting what was his firsthand, eyewitness account of Jesus Christ (1:1-4). Then in chapter 2, verse 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 (2:13). He writes to the children, because they *know* the Father (2:14). He says (3:14), "*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren.*" In fact there are 36 instances of the word *know* in First John.

As he moves now to conclude this letter, John drives home this idea of absolute static truth. He pulls the letter together and sews it all up in chapter 5, verse 13 saying "*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.*" And now in 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.*" Again and again even in this final section he uses this word: verses 18, 19, 20: "*We know... we know... we know....*" John wants us to be certain about these important truths, and moreover to 'know' that there is empirical truth. To *know* we can *know*.

So as we close in on the finish line of this letter, we could easily step back from the fray and claim "we got it John. We understand what you're saying about all of this." But then John throws a final fastball right by us in 5:21: "*Little children, guard yourselves from idols.*" **Wow**. We stand there flat-footed at the plate thinking, "Where did that come from? John hasn't been talking about idolatry! In fact, He hasn't mentioned it in the entire letter!" Truthfully, it can appear quite out of context. But in fact, not only does it play herein, it in fact kind of sums up the entire message. Because idolatry is making up your own god as a substitute for the one true God, the one who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. Maybe we could sum up our text for this section with this one sentence:

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

But before John gets there however, he leads in with a few other remarks that are hard to grasp, controversial in their play, and contrary to most of our experience. Is John really saying that whatever we ask for we will receive and do so unequivocally? Because it sure sounds like that is what he is saying! But the fact is, over the years, there has been plenty of things...truthfully, *countless things*, that I have prayed for that has not come to pass as per my request. I have prayed for the salvation of people who have not gotten saved. I have prayed for the restoration of sinning Christians, who have not repented and are today lost out there someplace. I have prayed for the reconciliation of Christian marriages that have broken up. What is happening here?

So let's "unpack this" as Matt Chandler is fond of saying. Firstly, Verse 14 is obviously intimately connected with verse 13, and we know this because the Greek text opens with the word, "And". Thus our confidence in prayer is found only through our assurance that we have eternal life. If we do not have eternal life, there is no way that we can pray according to the will of God, except to pray that God would save you from your sins. The promise of our text is only for God's children. The promise is: "*As believers we have confidence that God will answer our prayers, if we pray carefully according to His will.*"

Secondly, the key seems to lay in the phrase "according to God's will." If it were not so, then God is not God but in fact we are. Such would relegate God to a subservient roll where He performs like a genie in a bottle and we make endless wishes that will all come true like a children's Disney film. What we *are* guaranteed, is that He will **hear** us. Again....not even **that** if we are not His, for elsewhere we read "*If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear.*" (Ps 66:18) Remember that John is effectively writing this letter to faithful believers!. The NLT renders that as "*If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.*" But if we are truly His child, then He hears us. He is not asleep nor is He ignoring us.

Yet we all know that God can...*well*, at times, be very quiet. He can sometimes operate in 'silent running' if you will. Scripture is replete with such instances. Once....between the Old and New Testament, it seems He was quiet for 400 years! His discussions with Paul and others proves that at times God simply answers "*my grace is sufficient for you now.*" Without faith in Him, scripture tells us that it is impossible to please Him. Thus sometimes His answer is to have faith in what He said He **would** do, and what He already said for us **to** do. Because never will our prayers negate what He already has said and what He always is by nature.

When the apostles asked Jesus to teach them to pray, His instruction included the prayer phrase "*thy will be done.*" Not *my* will be done, but Lord ultimately and universally "*your* will be done!" In that passage in Luke, as well as three times in three connected verse in Matthew 6, Jesus says "**WHEN** you pray..." Not "*if* you pray." Prayer is a critical and mandatory part of a Christians life! Many folks throughout my years of ministry have tried to tell me that their place in the body of Christ...their "gifting," was to pray. They were 'prayer' in the list of spiritual body parts. Well, I tell them that everyone who calls themselves a child of God better have that gift! Prayer is not a spiritual gift in that context, but rather a innate aspect of Christian life for everyone.

When we attempt to circumvent God's will for our own...our attempt to get God in a headlock to support whatever notion we might have rolling around in our heads, we are saying that we know better than God, that we don't really trust Him, and that He is not in fact an all-knowing sovereign and timeless God but rather again, just here for our comfort and pleasure. So perhaps we need to ask ourselves firstly just who is God in our personal world?

Because...seeming to know just where we tend to come from and how we approach God, John dealt with that in that final 'fast ball' ..."*keep yourself from idols.*" And maybe we could add..."*even if that idol is you.*" If 'God is love' as John so claims in this letter, then we must ask ourselves "do we really believe that He loves us? And do we know what 'God love' looks like and how it plays in our lives?"

So if we are to pray...if we are to *ask*, according to God's will, one therefore would need to know God's will. *Or would we?* Because scripture intimates that if anything could happen outside of His will, then He would not be in control of the universe. He would not be the sovereign who plans it and does it (Isa. 46:9-11). What then IS His will?

1 Thess 5:18 says it is God's will for us to give thanks in all circumstances. 1 Thess 4:13 tells us that it is God's will that we be sanctified, and that we abstain from sexual immorality. 1 Peter 2:15 says that it is God's will that we do good deeds. Certainly scripture is full of both explicit and implied directives as to God's will for us. But that is not the problem, is it? The problem arises when we want to peer into the glass ball of future days and receive an answer to specific personal questions and agenda. And the fact is, God sometimes answers our enquiries with clarity and sometimes simply asks us to do what He already has told us, and He will keep the position of God and handle the rest. Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD..." But He doesn't say that in every case YOU will.

Therefore we must, by the very definition and character of God, trust in Him to oversee our lives. This is the essence of faith and in fact the heart of Christianity. Sometimes...and ultimately in **all** times, our prayer must be "*your will be done*".... and "*even if I don't know it or understand it.*" Yet we must also see that God does not prohibit us in asking. In fact he encourages it! James 1:5 says "*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.*" And James 4:2 says "...*you do not have because you do not ask.*"

But James goes right on to say immediately after that, that "*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*" So when we ask "wrongly" or for something that is out of His will for us, the answer is 'no.' And after asking we must then accept that God has 'got it' and He isn't just messing with you, or holding His will behind His back and asking you to "guess which hand." Nor is He again just ignoring you or putting you off. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise...*"

The fact is that God's will is quite often not seen or recognized by us in our mortal bodies. "*His ways are not our ways*"...they are in fact "*beyond our finding out.*" (Isa. 55:8-9). If they were not, who would need God at all?

*Verse 16: If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.*

What **is** clear from this text is that we...on earth, have some mystical participation in another person's stance with God, but I do not pretend to understand it clearly. John tells us here that if we pray for someone...a 'sinning brother' (which is fairly vague in itself) God will give "life" to that brother. But does that mean salvational life? No, it can't mean that, for no one of us can play a part in the salvation of another or dictate what God does with another. But the word "life" has some real positive connotations for sure, so we can't go wrong in the practice of prayer intervention on the behalf of another...especially someone who is tied up in some sin matter.

But when it comes to a "sin leading to death," apparently that is another matter. But what 'death' does he speak of here? Eternal salvational death? Or just cessation of mortal life? Because there is no question that some sins will definitely kill you! Perhaps we are looking too hard and the sin unto death is simply the sin of unbelief which prohibits salvation and eternal life, but as John has already said elsewhere in this letter, believers will indeed sin...we will fall short. If this is the case (and I personally believe that this is what John is saying), we can indeed supernaturally intervene in another's life journey through the exercise of prayer on their behalf. This is, after all, some powerful stuff we are dealing with here when we talk about the practice of prayer.

In 1921, the great Thomas Edison was quoted as saying, "*We don't know the millionth part of one percent about anything. We don't know what water is. We don't know what light is. We don't know what gravitation is. We don't know what electricity is. We don't know what heat is. We have a lot of hypotheses about these things, but that is all. But we do not let our ignorance about all these things deprive us of their use.*" (cited by Lehman Strauss, *Sense and Nonsense About Prayer* [Moody Press], p. 122). I must tell you that this issue of intervention and prayer is one of those things. It is reaching into the "God Realm" ...a different dimension beyond our grasp and ability to understand. You use your cell phone every day, but who knows how that crazy little thing does what it does. We just care that it does what it does, and we get really crazy when it doesn't!

Verse 18 says "*We know that whoever is born of God does not sin;*( perfect tense; meaning He will not continue in and make a practice of sin.) *but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.*" John has clearly said that believers **do** sin (1:8, 10; 2:1; 5:16), so he must mean here that no genuine child of God lives in a state of sin. In the midst of sin, either the fight is on, or there is indeed no fight at all because the guy is lost.

In verse 18, John says that "*he who has been born of God keeps himself...*" which again denotes one's personal involvement in his personal sanctification. The false teachers of John's day and ours will say it's all God so if I fail it is essentially HIS fault, because I play no part in sanctification. Someone is lying, and I'll stand with John.

The fact is, there are spiritual and life aspects that we may not understand the dynamics of, but we know the outcome. John has spent 5 chapters telling us that this is a fact. When someone is on a road that I know for a fact has no crossroads and no exits, then that person is going to eventually come to one thing and that is what is waiting at the end of that road...the thing that is and always has been there. The only salvation is to turn around. That's called repentance. Unless that happens, then the end will happen for him or her like every other time and for every other person. In that, there is no doubt. Are we willing to pray and then let God lead? If not, we have made an idol of ourselves, and the letter of 1 John is a bust. Not in ultimate truth, just for us...

So I leave you with this letter, so succinctly encompassed in verse 19: "*We know that we are of God...*"

**Do you?**