



John's Final Words

Bible verses: 1 John 5:13-21

I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God. And we have this confidence in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in regard to whatever we ask, we know that what we have asked him for is ours. If anyone sees his brother sinning, if the sin is not deadly, he should pray to God and he will give him life. This is only for those whose sin is not deadly. There is such a thing as deadly sin, about which I do not say that you should pray. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not deadly. We know that no one begotten by God sins; but the one begotten by God he protects, and the evil one cannot touch him. We know that we belong to God, and the whole world is under the power of the evil one. We also know that the Son of God has come and has given us discernment to know the one who is true. And we are in the one who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Children, be on your guard against idols.

Ask everyone in the group to have their Bibles with them. Ask one person to read the passage out loud. Encourage them to have their pens and to underline things that strike them, especially later in the Bible when you go through the key words and phrases. Also, encourage them to make notes.

After the reading of the passage is complete, explain the context.

Context

The First Letter of St. John covers a lot of ground. The main context to remember is that the community started to question everything because of the opposition that came their way. Jews and Romans rejected them in Jerusalem. The pagans rejected them when the community moved to Greece. If that wasn't enough, the community was split in two over the question of whether Jesus was actually God.

The writer wants to bring the community back to Jesus, not the idea of Jesus, but to their personal experience of Jesus. He wanted to remind them of what they heard from Him, what they saw in Him, and how their lives were changed by Him.

He wanted them to know that true followers of Jesus followed his commandments. They are to remember that they are children of God and have the power of God living within them. With this power, by living in the truth they heard from Jesus, and by loving each other to the point of prostrating their souls for each other, they can conquer anything.

These final nine verses are his last thoughts about how they are to live in prayer and how to live when they see sin in others.

After explaining the context, ask someone to read the passage to the group again. When the reader has finished, go back through and highlight the key words and phrases found below.

Key Words and Phrases

- *Will*: Found in verse 14, the Greek word is “thelēma” (thel-AY-mah). It can be translated as “desire,” “pleasure” or “choice.”
- *Deadly*: Found in verses 16 and 17, the Greek root is “pros thanaton” (prohs THAN-ah-ton). The phrase literally means “towards death.” It can be either spiritual or physical death. In this case, it is spiritual death, separation from the life of God.
- *Belong to God*: Found in verse 2, the Greek word is “ek tou Theou” (eck too THEH-oo). The phrase means “out from God.” The sense is that we live in God and go out to the world from Him.
- *Idols*: Found in verse 21, the Greek word is “eidōlōn” (EYE-doh-lohn). All other New Testament uses of this word refer to false gods found in the pagan temples.

Now you may provide the following interpretation.

Interpretation

A lot of college students experience something like these final verses when they have phone calls with their parents while they’re at school. There can be wide-ranging conversations that cover many different topics, but then right before the parent hangs up there is litany of other things: “Remember to wash your sheets,” “Be sure you go to the mailbox in case there is a package,” “Let someone proof your papers.” It is the final reminder of important things that didn’t get covered but need to be addressed. Sometimes something important comes up that needs more time, but you or your parent has to run. These final verses serve as something similar.

There are two major topics that get introduced. The first is about prayer. He says that when we ask for something that is in accord with God’s desire for us, then He will grant it. Many times, we pray for things that we don’t get. John seems to say that these are in accord with the will of God. Taking all the things John has written about, it seems he is saying the real role of prayer is to come to know God. When we know God, we know his will. When we know his desires, then we can ask.

The second topic that gets introduced is that of “deadly sin.” John doesn’t offer too much insight in these verses as to what deadly sin actually is. We have to look at other parts of his letter for that. We’ll get to that in a bit, but for now it is important to see that the distinction that Catholics make between “mortal sin” and “venial sin” has its biblical roots in these passages. A few years after the First Letter of St. John was written, we find early Church writings that indicate there were three sins that would be considered “mortal” or “deadly”: 1) murder 2) adultery 3) idolatry. Committing sins such as these

would have broken the unity between the members of the community and would have removed one from the Eucharist and from the community.

It seems that idolatry was being addressed with this because the last word from John is “be on your guard against idols.” There were people who committed idolatry who then wanted to be brought back into the Church. These people, who were called the “lapsi,” presented a problem for the early Church. The sacrament of Reconciliation emerged as the way to heal the division between the sinner and the Church, but that is a lesson for Church history rather than a Bible study.

The main point is that there are different degrees of sin. Deadly sin does exist from a biblical standpoint, and the use of the word “pros thanaton,” “toward death,” means that these sins separate us from the life of God.

Now you may lead a discussion using the following guide.

Application to Real Life

- Have you ever asked God for something and not gotten it? Do you think that what you asked for was not part of God’s will? What was the outcome?
- We have all seen friends at school or at church sinning. Were these sins deadly, either physically or spiritually deadly? Did you step in and say something? At what point do you say something to someone? Would you want someone to say something to you if you were at risk of separating yourself from God’s life?
- While pagan temples are rare today, what do you think are some false gods that modern people have in their lives? What are some of the biggest idols that teens have?
- What is most memorable or what struck you as being the most important thing you learned over the course of the five studies on 1 John?

Closing Prayer

Ask someone else to read the passage for a final time and then pray the following prayer.

God our Father, help us to pray. Help us to know you and know what your desires are for us, for our family, for our parish, for the Church, and for our world. Keep us from every sin, especially the sins that put us in danger of losing our friendship with you and with your Church. Through the teaching of St. John, help us to be better Christians. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.