

SERIES: Authentic Christian Community/1 John, Wk. 4

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People who know me know I don't exactly have a love affair with modern technology. I just kind of tolerate it, I guess. It isn't just that I don't know; it's that I don't even know what I don't know. I think that's how a lot of people feel about religion. Really, when you think about it, how confusing could this be? You have all these world religions that make contradictory truth claims, and, even if you boil it down to Christianity, you have all these denominations, and all these differences, and you have counterfeit churches, and you have Christian churches, and some people feel that way, "I don't even know what I don't know." I can fully appreciate that.

We have been working our way through John's letter. At the end of his letter his conclusion is, "Here are a handful of things you need to know, in order to experience confidence in your relationship with God." If you have a Bible, turn to 1 John, Chapter 5. It's fairly obvious as you go through this final text, that John's favorite word in his conclusion is the word *know*—k-n-o-w. But this is not the word *know* that's a familiar Greek word, *to know intimately*, or *to know through experience* — often used to describe, for example, the intimate relationship between a husband and a wife. This is not that word. It's a different Greek word for *know*. It carries more the idea *to know for sure*, *to know with certainty*. This is *something we can absolutely know*.

We pick it up in Verse 13:

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. (*NASB, 1 John 5:13)

Now if you go to John's Gospel, when he gets to the end of the Gospel, he tells you he's written what he's written in his Gospel, in order that you might believe. Now in his letter, he's writing to believers, and we've tried to keep that perspective all the way through the letter. He says...**I've written these things in order that you might know that you have eternal life.** Now this is important to understand, because I think a lot of people would be under the impression that you can't know that — that you don't really know that until the *end of the day*. And they kind of have this image of standing before St. Peter, and he opens this big book, and everybody's kind of holding their breath, and he looks through the list and he says who's "in" and who's "out" — and until that moment, you can't possibly know. That idea really comes from the idea that Salvation is on the basis of some sort of religious performance. As long as Salvation is on the basis of your performance — more good than bad — or somehow performing well enough, it's true you couldn't possibly know. Religion is driven by fear, and shame, and guilt, and this reality that you *can't know*. You have this anxiety until the end of the day, and then you find out if enough was enough. So what is the basis by which John would say, "You can know"? There's only one possible answer to that. If Salvation is purely a gift from God, *I know* whether or not I've received that gift. And, on the basis of what Jesus has done *for me*, then *I can know* — because it has nothing to do with my ability to perform some sort of spiritual or religious duty. Now,

when you think about the message of grace — basically the message of the Gospel — what possible message could the world hear, that has more hope than the message of grace?

It's very popular in our culture for people to feel like Christians should keep their message to themselves. This is not something that we should share. If you believe it, that's fine, but keep it to yourself. I would raise the question, "Why would we do that?" I would want to ask the culture, "Help me understand. What is the compelling message of the culture that has more hope, which would cause us to remain silent with our message?" The message of religion is an absolutely empty, despairing message, because everybody in the world of religion knows, that if Salvation is on the basis of performance, then only the best of the best get in. It's for the high performers; it's for the religious elite, which means the majority of people simply have no chance. It's a message filled with despair. But the message of the Gospel is so *other than that*. It doesn't matter if you are black or white; it doesn't matter if you are in the affluence of America or the streets of India. It doesn't matter if you think you've been mostly good, or if you have been the most horrible person on the planet. It doesn't matter where you are from; it doesn't matter how much money you have had, or what you've done. It doesn't matter your religious activity. The only thing that matters is, whether or not you are willing to receive God's gift of Salvation. You can be eighty years old and have spent your entire life living in rebellion to God, but, if in the last hour of your life on the face of the planet, you choose to receive the gift, God grants you His salvation. No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter where you've been, God's salvation is freely offered to every single person on the face of the planet. What possible message could the culture provide that has more hope than that? And if that's true, how could we possibly remain silent? Wouldn't our own moral conscience demand that we share this message of hope? These things are written ...**in order that you may know that you have eternal life.**

Verse 14:

This is the confidence which we have before Him, 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. (Vs. 14-15)

This is the confidence...if we can know we are a child of God, then we have the confidence to know that what we ask, **He hears**. The word *hears* here is a very strong Greek word. It means *to hear attentively*; it means *to pay close attention*. The promise is, that if you are a child of God — and *we can know that* — that you have the assurance that when you cry out to God, when you pray to God, when you ask of God, **He hears**; He listens attentively; He pays attention to what you have to say. There is never a time when God is preoccupied. There's never a time when God is too busy. There is never a time when God is out of town on a business trip. There's never a time when God is busy texting and not listening. There is never a time when God doesn't hear you. There is no "Out of the Office" sign. This is really a staggering concept. **Every moment of every day God listens to His children.**

Every moment of every day God listens to His children. Now I would be the first one to tell you, you must believe this by faith. I understand there are times when it feels like God is a million miles away; it feels like our prayers are hitting the ceiling. It doesn't feel like God listens. If He does listen, it doesn't seem like God cares. But God tells the truth when He says,

“If you are My child, I listen attentively.” Just because we don’t always get what we ask for, doesn’t mean God hasn’t been listening.

Now over the years, I have tried to form my own kind of basic theology for when it seems like God doesn’t seem to listen; it doesn’t seem like God is hearing me; it doesn’t seem like God cares. And kind of the basics of that theology are all here in John’s letter. Start with believing that what God says is true: He listens; there is never a case where God doesn’t hear me. Second of all, I do believe God loves me. John says, God’s love for me isn’t religious theory. At a point in time, He demonstrated His love for me, by giving up His own Son to be tortured, in order that I may have Salvation. I believe that God loves me. I believe He hears me, and I believe God has the power to do whatever needs to be done. John says, “Greater is He that is in me than He that is in the world.” Now if those things were not true, there would be every reason for despair. If, in my hour of need, God doesn’t hear me, or doesn’t care about me, or simply lacks the power to do something for me, I would have reason for despair — and that’s hard to live with! But if I really do believe God hears me; God loves me; and God has the power; then if He chooses to *not* do what I’d like him to do, there must be a reason. And even though I may never know that reason, I can accept that. I don’t have to like it — but I can accept it. I am absolutely convinced that God wrestles with this pain, which is basically the inability to explain to His children why sometimes things are the way they are, simply because we’re limited and He’s not. And because He is a sovereign God, He knows the beginning from the end, and it simply isn’t possible to explain all of that to us, in a way we could comprehend it. So I settle it by understanding: He listens to me; He loves me. He doesn’t lack the power; this must be part of the story — and if that is the case, then I’m going to accept that.

John says that when we ask, we receive. But he also said when we ask ...**according to His will**. Now we already talked about that in Chapter 3 — that when we walk in obedience to God, and we walk in alignment with the vision of God, then there’s great power in our prayers. He’s not saying that if we showed up like a consumer with a grocery list, we get everything we want. There’s nowhere where the Bible says that. But again, think about this: we’re talking about a love relationship. We’ve defined this over and over again. Love is dying to myself; love is thinking of someone else as more important than myself. Well certainly the ultimate expression of that, would be our love for God. When we come before God, it shouldn’t be all about me, and, “This is my grocery list and this is everything I want,” and figuring out some kind of formula to manipulate God into giving me everything I want. If we really love God, shouldn’t it be about God and surrender, and what God wants, and God’s vision for the world, and what’s on the heart of God? And that’s what John is saying. When we start to understand that and when we come before God, what we really want to know is, “God, what do you want, and what is your vision, and what’s on Your heart?” and I want to be in alignment with that. It’s then that we start to experience power in our prayers. And that is what John is saying, “This we know” - He listens to us and He responds according to His will.

Verse 16:

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. There is a sin *leading* to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.

Now I have to tell you: Verse 16 is a really hard verse. I mentioned there is a lot of debate around Verse 6. You can take Verse 6 and Verse 16 — by an overwhelming margin — these are the two most argued and discussed verses in this letter. So I’m going to give you my best shot at

trying to explain this, with a little asterisk. This is a really hard verse, and it's hard to be real dogmatic about any interpretation. I think, as is always the case, the Bible is its own best commentary. So you look at the text within the context — what's before it, what's after it — what are the words and phrases that John has used throughout his letter and how might that help us? I find that helpful in this text. He just talked to us about **...if we ask**, so clearly Verse 16 is an illustration of that. So he's saying, "This is an example of a prayer in alignment with the will of God." So what's he talking about? Let's start with **...committing a sin not leading to death**. You will notice that *leading* is in italics. That tells you it's not in the original text; it's inserted in there. So the literal reads, *his brother committing a sin not to death*. Now when we read the words *life* and *death*, it doesn't necessarily mean Salvation or not Salvation. As a matter of fact, I think sometimes we take these texts and we want to reduce them down to *in* or *out* — and most of the Biblical language isn't *in* or *out*.

Life is a metaphor for the life of God, so *death* would be the opposite of that. If I live my life in sin as a Christian, I'm not experiencing life. Even though I have eternal life, I'm basically experiencing the consequences of my choices, which is more death — it's the absence of life. And I think that's what he's talking about here. So when he's talking about **a sin not leading to death**, I think what he's talking about is what he talked about in Chapter 1, when he said, "If we say we have no sin, we are liars." Of course we stumble and fall, but when we do, "If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." So he is saying that sometimes we do blow it. Sometimes we do stumble, and it convicts us, and it grieves our heart, and there is something inside of us that says, "That's not the way I want to live my life; that's not what I want to do; that breaks my heart." And we agree with God that it is sin, and that's not the path of life, and we experience God's forgiveness. He cleanses us from all unrighteousness. That would be *a sin not leading to death*. In other words, it's a sin; we feel the conviction; we confess it, and we stay on the path of life.

So the prayer that would be in the alignment with the will of God has to do with that: **if anyone sees** — which means we actually see it; we become aware of it — **a brother**, which is a fellow Christian — a brother or sister in Christ. So in other words, when I see a brother or sister in Christ involved in some sin, what do I do? I don't post it on Facebook. I don't call a handful of friends. I don't pick up a rock and throw it. The most powerful thing I can do is intercede — immediately go before the throne of grace and pray what would be in alignment with the will of God — that this person would understand that is the way of destruction, that there would be confession — there would be an agreement — this person would accept the cleansing power of Jesus, and get back on the road of life.

I think the prayer also includes that, as believers in Christ, we would accept God's forgiveness. I think this is one of the big problems in the church; **we talk about the forgiveness of God, but we struggle to accept it**. Six months later, we are still agonizing; we are still beating ourselves up over our failure and our sin. We have a tendency to think that as long as I beat myself up long enough, that is going to impress God. It's important to understand that's not humility; that's disbelief. God has said, "If you confess your sin, I'm faithful and just to forgive your sin, and cleanse you from all unrighteousness." **Faith would be to take God at His word**. It's been washed away. It's over. Move on down the path of life.

I mentioned in the message that there's kind of this core theology I like to rehearse, when life gets really painful or confusing. I want to go back through that again, because people have found

it helpful. First of all, I know when I pray, God hears me. He's not distracted, He's not on vacation, He's there and He hears me. Number two, I know I'm His child and He loves me. John's reminded us that He demonstrated His love to me, He sent His own Son to save me, and I know He has the power to do something. So if that's true - He hears me; He loves me; He has the power to change things - if He still allows something into my life, then I believe it must be for a reason. Just because I don't know the reason, doesn't mean there isn't a reason. The alternative to that would be thinking of life as a lottery, and you just get a losing ticket, and that's all there is to it. To me, that would be unbearable. Even though I don't understand the reason, I can trust God, that for reasons only He understands, this is necessary for me to fulfill my purpose in life.

Several years ago, I was out in the pasture and I was spraying weeds. I had a golden retriever that of all my dogs has been my favorite, and he always wanted to be at my side, but as I was spraying weeds in the pasture, he kept walking through the weeds with the wet spray, and I found myself thinking that can't be good for him. So I took him up on the porch and I made him sit. And pretty soon he came back out in the pasture, and I took him back, and I made him sit again, said it a little bit more strongly, and he just sat on the porch with those golden retriever eyes, pouting. And I imagine he's thinking, "Why did you have to do that to me? I just wanted to be with you," and I've found myself frustrated with the fact that there was no way I could explain to a dog, why I just did what I did. I did it in his best interests, but because he's a dog and I'm a human, there was no way to explain that, and I actually found myself wondering if that's how God feels. **God knows the beginning from the end.** He knows the story and He knows why things need to be allowed in our lives, but because He's God and we're not, sometimes there's no way God can explain it, in such a way that we'll understand it. **All we can do is trust Him.** Tomorrow we'll finish our study on First John. See you then.