

Series: John's Letters

Title: How to Live in a Sin-Sick World

Text: 1 John 5:19-21

Date: August 8, 2021

Verse 19

John continued to provide assurance in verse 19, saying, "We know that we are of God, and the whole world is under the sway of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). The word translated "know" was one of the Gnostic's favorite terms. They used it to speak of their supposed special knowledge. John used it in reference to the assurance of salvation that true believers can enjoy. Such was the main motive of his writing (1 John 5:13). He wanted his readers to stop doubting, to be undeterred by the error of the heretics. He told them that they were "of God." The language depicted God's children as being birthed out of Him. The apostle used similar language back in 1 John 4:6 and 5:1. True Christians never need to be unnerved by the criticisms of the world or false religionists. Since they are "of God," their standing is secure. The values and opinions of unregenerate people are of little consequence.

John also sought to provide assurance by reminding his readers that "the whole world is under the sway of the evil one." His words were undoubtedly intended as a characterization of the false teachers who sowed deception in the church. John wanted the faithful to know that such people were not "of God." They were unredeemed and they were under the spell of Satan. In accord with Jesus, John depicted the sinful world as being ruled by Satan (John 12:31). The controversies in Asia Minor were not just a matter of personal preference or another person's way of seeing things. The Devil was actively blinding people to God's truth (2 Corinthians 4:4). The true believers needed to stand strong and secure in their salvation, making no concessions to the false teachers.

Verse 20

John further sought to encourage his readers by reminding them of the insight they had in Christ. He said, "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" (1 John 5:20). The Gnostics denied the incarnation. John affirmed it once again (1 John 1:1-2). Jesus really came in the flesh. With His coming, Jesus gave "understanding" to His children. The language of verse 20 employed perfect tense verbiage to depict a past event with abiding results. John wanted believers to know that Jesus had permanently given a special sort of understanding to His church. Though the lost lack spiritual insight (Ephesians 4:18), the redeemed are led by deep, abiding, spiritual truth. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

According to John, true Christians were ones who knew "the true one." The word "true" referred to what was real, unfeigned, and not fictitious.¹ It depicted that which was genuine.² The faithful remnant in Asia Minor didn't need to listen to the religious lies they heard. They knew "the God of truth" (Isaiah 65:16).

But the true believers of Asia Minor didn't just "know the true one," they were "in the true one." Through Jesus Christ, they had come into a personal relationship with "the only true God" (John 17:3). Like the Thessalonians, they had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). As a result, they enjoyed "eternal life." The claims of the false teachers were false. Jesus was true and the believers of Asia Minor possessed truth. Real life, eternal life, was found in Christ and His doctrine, not the fashionable

¹ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 43.

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 599.

philosophies of fallen humanity. The real believers needed to stand strong. They had truth and life in Jesus.

Verse 21

John closed his first epistle with a short, yet important, command: “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). The term of address (“little children”) was an affectionate title. John used it elsewhere in his letter (1 John 2:12, 28). In employing the term in our current verse, the apostle meant to convey his love for the church. But he also meant to indicate that his words were intended for believers. Some might have mistaken his appeal in verse 21 as being a rebuke of the false teachers. John wanted to be clear that even true believers must guard themselves against temptations toward idolatry. The temptation to violate God’s Law in reference to false gods is ever-present in every generation (Exodus 20:1-7). Even the strongest Christian is susceptible to the allurements of profane worship.

The word rendered “idols” in verse 21 was one that literally meant “a form” or “an appearance.”³ In short, it referred to something one could see, as the word was closely related to a term that referred to the act of seeing. Whereas God is unseen (1 Timothy 6:16), and whereas none has the natural capacity to see God apart from divine revelation (1 John 4:12), the tendency of the human heart has often been to create false gods one can see. Because they lack faith, many find comfort and security in living for gods their eyes can behold.

In the end, such idols are nothingness. As the Psalmist said, “Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. They have hands but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk. They cannot make a sound with their throats” (Psalm 115:4-7). One has rightly said that an idol was nothing more than “an imaginary deity.”⁴ False gods cannot satisfy. They give no strength, security, or salvation. They are nothingness. They do nothing, they provide nothing, and they accomplish nothing. Those who worship them ultimately have nothing.

An idol is “that which seems to be a god” in the eye of the one who is devoted to it.⁵ It is something to which one gives supreme allegiance, a misplaced source of meaningfulness and contentment. An idol isn’t necessarily a be gold-plated statues. The Bible says greed can be a form of idolatry (Romans 2:22). Christians should be on guard. Money, homes, cars, clothes, food, possessions, politics, friendships, health, a reputation, a hobby, or a career can occupy an inordinate place in one’s heart or soul. Scripture instructs us that Christians should turn from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

It is no wonder that John told his readers to “guard” themselves from idols. The word rendered “guard” was one used of a watchman in the first century.⁶ It portrayed a preserving or protecting type of action. It conveyed the idea of keeping oneself safe from harm.⁷ In the original language of the text, John used verbiage that denoted personal effort, employing a reflexive pronoun.⁸ Paul used the same language to encourage Timothy to guard himself spiritually (1 Timothy 6:20 and 2 Timothy 1:14). Peter used it to tell believers, “...make every effort to be found without spot or blemish in his sight, at peace” (2 Peter 3:14). The meaning for John’s readers was clear. With the help of the Holy Spirit, they needed to exercise vigilance

³ Zodhiates, 511.

⁴ Zodhiates, 511.

⁵ Louw and Nida, [CD-Rom].

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 403.

⁷ Zodhiates, 1457-1458.

⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 599.

to make sure no form of idolatry gained sway over their souls. The prevalence of false philosophies and worldly living making such holy watchfulness a must.