
Living With Certainty



Message by Pastor Tom, Interim Lead Pastor
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Scripture Passage 1st John 5:13-21
Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, Canada



When I laid out this series on 1st John many months ago over 10 Sundays, I knew that we had left ourselves the whole last chapter for this last Sunday, and that was not going to work very well. I thought I would decide what to do when I got there. Well, here I am! Now what do I do?

Also, there are several paragraphs in this final chapter that are a great source of study and debate for theologians and for the people who write commentaries, but which frankly leave us more puzzled and confused than helped. They leave us with more questions than answers. They do not give us clear pastoral instruction or practical advice, especially for sermons on a Sunday morning.

E.g. the testimony of the Spirit, the water and the blood

Also, the paragraph about not praying for someone whose sin leads to death. While some issues are great material for theological discussion and debate, I am always drawn to what will help us pastorally in the weeks to come.

So I have chosen focus on the last major section, starting at verse 13. I appreciate that this leaves material left behind, and perhaps leaves some questions unanswered.

To understand where we will go today, you have to allow me to be a little bit technical with you. There is a level of meaning here that is lost in English and that lies beneath the surface, but which is vital to understand this last passage.

Remember that John wrote his gospel to bring unbelievers to a place of knowing and believing in Jesus Christ.

He gives us his reason in John chapter 20.

30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.

31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

However this epistle or letter that we have been studying is written primarily to Christians, to believers, and the primary purpose is that they would live with Christian certainty and spiritual assurance in uncertain times, a message still needed today.

This theme and emphasis on assurance/being certain in his letter is built around the phrase "to know" or the word "knowledge" which appears

some 40 times in just over 100 verses.

The Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*. It gives us the word *gnosticism*. The verb is *ginosko*. Sound like something you would order in a sushi bar. Have you tried the *ginosko*? It's really good!

The meaning behind this word is that you can examine the evidence, look at the data and bit by bit, you can come to know. Examination and experience eventually brings us to knowledge. There is nothing wrong with that. We all know when we have worked at something and tried this way and that way, and trial and error have gotten us to the place where something has worked.

But in English, there are times when we suddenly say, I see it! I've got it! It is as though the light went on inside our heads. Somehow we have moved beyond the level of experimenting/trying. We now know. The fog has cleared away. We see it! We are at a point of personal certainty.

That is exactly what John does in this closing paragraph, starting at verse 13.

The word for “to know” changes in the epistle and a different word is used. It is really the basis of the word “to see”, and it has the sense, not so much of growing towards something through experience, or examination, but rather, you just see it. There is an inner intuitive sense about which you are 100% certain. The light has come on. We have certainty!

Here is a verse in this section in which both words are used. We do not see this in English.

5:20 We know (literally – we see) also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know (ginosko – to come to know through experience) him who is true.

This word for to know, meaning to see, is used again and again in this last section, and it creates for us a number of stepping stones on which we can walk in the midst of the uncertainty and ambiguity of our culture. These certainties do not relate just to some abstract or disconnected “spiritual life” because that would be to repeat the mistakes of dualism, and merely create a spirituality that is removed from daily life.

They are like stepping stones that we can stand on. He is saying, as you live in the world, with all its shifting sand and instability, with all its changes,

here are truths upon which you can place your feet and build your life. You can put your weight on these truths and they will hold you up.

Rather they are certainties that have practical reality for lives we have to lead each day.

#1 THE CERTAINTY OF A SPIRITUAL ORIENTATION.

Verse 13.

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Most Christians relegate the thought and meaning of eternal life from this life into the next one. We think that eternity comes later. This impoverishes its meaning and makes us little or no different from the average secularist in how we look at life. We assume that we have to struggle through life like everyone else, but one day we will have eternal life.

But eternal life is more than a future hope. Eternal life starts as a present reality and changes how we live today.

1st John 3:14

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.

Notice, it is not, we will pass, but we have passed.

Eternal life is like the kingdom of God, operating both here and now, and also to come. It is both present and future.

The Christian is to have an intuitive sense that value of eternal life is to give all of life a supernatural orientation. Harry Blamires (The Christian Mind) regards this supernatural orientation as one of the six qualities of a Christian mind. He says that the Christian sees all of human life and history as held in the hands of God. This supernatural orientation is essential for daily life or we will become lost in the quagmire of daily details.

As an aside, Blamires defines the six marks of a Christian mind as being

- Supernatural orientation
- Its awareness of evil
- Its conception of Truth
- Its acceptance of authority
- Its concern for the person, meaning it is Incarnational

Its sacramental cast. It sees all of life as sacred.

A prime mark of the Christian is to be supernaturally orientated. The light and reality of eternal life is to shine into all the darkness and struggle of daily

life and give us a spiritual perspective.

2 Cor 5:18

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

The struggles of time are contained within the reality of eternity, not by saying that one day this will end and a better day will begin, but rather, the reality of that better day already shines into the struggles of today and transforms them.

Without that supernatural perspective in daily life, I have a sense that there is little to stop us from drowning in the fog of despair and in swamp of pessimism. It is the certainty of eternal life that prevents life from being lost in a maze of absurd and meaningless contradictions.

#2 THERE IS THE CERTAINTY OF ANSWERED PRAYER.

14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: 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 what we asked of him.

Here is another place where we can put our feet with assurance, we have confidence in a God who hears. We have confidence in a God who answers prayer.

All of us have to come to the mature understanding that prayer is not some kind of blank cheque, where we fill in the blanks and God gives us whatever we want. Prayer is not where we fill out our wish list for some cosmic Santa Claus. Mature prayer is where we bend our will and life to the mind of God.

My old principal **REO WHITE**, the man who taught me how to think, gave me a love for the Scriptures, writes about the three ways in which God answers prayer.

1 God may miraculously change the situation about which we pray. Many of us could testify to the times in which immovable things have been moved, unchangeable circumstances have been changed, closed doors have been opened, and we look and we say, God answered that.

We have seen God heal where hope was gone.

2 God may show us how to change the situation we are praying about.

We cry out, Lord, do this, and he replies, go and do it yourself. We pray, Send someone to visit this person, and the Lord says, go visit yourself. We pray, Lord, Provide food for this person, go and get it yourself. Sometimes the answer to prayer is a command for us to get going. Prayer is never a substitute for initiative, enterprise, or for work!

3 God may leave the situation as it is and change us. That is sometimes the hardest answer to receive. We wanted things to change and we are the ones who have to be changed.

Sometimes the places where the greatest changes have to take place is really in our own lives. For most of us, this is where the miracle of prayer really has its work cut out.

#3 THERE IS THE CERTAINTY OF MORAL SAFETY

John says

5:18 We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.

We have travelled over this ground before, back in 1st John 3:9

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.

God has impregnated us with the seed [sperm] of his Holy Spirit. He has implanted his nature within us so that it will now be the most normal and natural thing in the world for us to desire his life and to have a bias towards righteousness. Holy living is the natural expression of the new life within us.

Notice how John puts it, because we are born of God, we are kept safe by the one who was truly born of God, Jesus.

Someone has said, 5 minutes in the limelight may make you a star, but character is built on the unseen succession of small obediences and tiny acts of faith. One of the really crazy features in our culture at the moment is the way in which the news media makes stories out of the antics of celebrities, particularly the female celebrities.

The most basic decision you and I can make every day that will build into our Christian lives and nourish the spirit of assurance within us, is simply to think and live like a Christian, to think and live like someone who has new life implanted within them.

When our outer world is in conflict with our inner world because of actions we have taken, we sow confusion within ourselves. But when our actions in our outer world mirror what

we believe in our inner world, we are building confidence with ourselves.

When we come to moments of doubt we have to honestly ask ourselves, is there anything I have been thinking or doing in the past while which contradicts my faith and belief, and therefore sows the seeds of doubt in me?

#4 THE CERTAINTY OF RADICAL TENSION

5:19 We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.

Christianity cannot be anything less than a radical change in lifestyle. The word radical comes from the Latin word RADIX, meaning the root.

Down through history, Christians have done a lot of different things to try to avoid the pressures and the struggle of living in a fallen world. They have retreated into monasteries, created communes and colonies and kept outsiders out, they have created rules to define what true Christians would do and not do.

Few of these things if any have ever worked towards their intended goal.

Jesus prays in John 17

We need to remember the prayer of Jesus in John 17:15

15 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

There must be points of tension, or what we believe is not the kind of radical Christianity that Jesus taught and invited people to follow. If our life as Christians is at ease with our culture, then something is wrong!

When you wed Christian truth to naturalism, you weaken the power of prayer.

When you wed Christian truth to pluralism, the uniqueness of Christianity falters and fails.

When you wed Christian truth to materialism, you secularize the meaning of the blessings of God.

When you bring the assertions of psychological determinism into Christianity, you rob the new birth of its spiritual identity.

These forces, each in their own way, have had a corrosive effect on historic Christian truth and convictions.

There is a moment of inner illumination, a moment of personal understanding about the tension of our faith that must come to every one of us. It is the moment of recognition when we see that there is a

tension between who we are and the world. In fact, the tension may lead to battle and it does. It must!

At that moment, we will either be defeated by compromise or we will stand and be counted.

We suddenly realize that as Ephesians 6 says

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

It takes us far beyond mere externals about living like a Christian, and whenever we reach that point in the battlefield of the mind, we must make deep, quiet conscious decisions about where to stand and how to stand.

At the moment we see the choice set before our own lives, when we know what we have to do and we do not buckle, I believe that we have come to a place of deep personal spiritual and moral strength. I think it was Plato who said, give me a place to stand and I will rule the world.

Finding that place to stand, coming to that decision of personal conviction is a piece of solid rock in the midst of cultural quicksand. You know that you

can stand on it, you know that you may stand on it alone. You do not have to follow the crowd, you do not care what the crowd says or does. This is where you will place your feet.

Whenever we find that place to stand for ourselves, we have found a place where we can and will be strong.

#5 CERTAINTY ABOUT WHAT IS TRUE [or REAL]

5:20 We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. [real]

The word "true" is better understood as "real".

The Son of God came in human form. John opened his letter by saying that we heard him. We saw him, we handled him, and he came so that we could have the understanding to see life as it really was. Jesus strips the illusions away from things, he enables us to see things the way they really are.

Perhaps this is what causes him to come to an abrupt end with the challenge, keep yourselves from idols, because idols are the unreal and imaginary things to which we give life and extend reality. Think of how silly it is, we live in a culture that makes unreal things real. We give unreal things our time, money,

attention, energy. We make imaginary things into our gods and we worship them. This is what we live for.

And at the same time, we take the reality of God, who is true and real, and we make him into something that is imaginary and make-believe. We take the truths of God and turn them into myths.

Postscript:

We live in uncertain times. People are uncertain of the future and what it will hold, where they will be, what will happen.

John wants us to be certain of our faith in Christ, so that we can live and walk with assurance

How do you know you are a Christian?

Well, he has given us three tests in this letter, kind of like a spiral staircase, winding its way up, stopping at different places along the climb.

The doctrinal test. We need to believe the truth about God and who Jesus Christ is. He is nothing less than God come in the flesh.

What do you believe?

The moral test. How do we live? We need to live lives that reflect the righteous nature of

God and the new life in us. Less than this will not do.

How do you live?

Then a final test is the test of love. How can we say we love God whom we have not seen, while we have thoughts of hate towards someone that we do see? If we love only in word and tongue and hold back some practical way of helping someone, then how can the love of God be truly in us?

How well do you love?