

One Thing Remains
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Jan 6, 2020

1 John 5:21

(NA 27th ed.)

(NIV)

Τεκνία,

Dear children,

φυλάξατε ἑαυτὰ ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων. keep yourselves from idols.

Phulassō means “guard” or “ward” as in phylactery or anaphylactic. “Idol” is pronounced similarly in many languages. What makes this verse prominent is that it is the concluding verse of the book. It is the last thought, the parting comment. But why would John end on this note?

Take a look at what immediately precedes this final verse, as far back as verse 18. John says that we who are born of God do not sin. That in itself is quite an amazing statement, right? Our new nature of having been born again outweighs our sin nature. We sin less and less over time. We don’t continue forever sinning.

What is also amazing is that the second half of the verse says there is a single person in particular who is born of God, who protects all who are born of God. It is because Jesus protects you, the sinless man guards you, that you don’t sin. Not only that, but the “evil one” does not “touch” you. Sin is cured through rebirth. We are guarded by Jesus from the devil. The next verse says that this is so while at the same time, everyone else is in Satan’s power. But we are not like them. The Son of God wards us.

The Son of God (verse 20 now) has given us understanding. No error or deception will stand, since we have divinely sanctioned understanding from Jesus. He is the true God. And he gives us all we need for living. Basically, we are set. Our beatitude is perfect. We lack nothing. Hallelujah!

But then, after laying out our eternal security so eloquently and lifting our spirits high to contemplate the graces we have in Christ, the author suddenly changes his rhetoric, and ends on a discordant note, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” What? How does he get to that from what he had just been going on about? What a downer!

At this point, I think of all of the ways that the Bible speaks of idolatry. To trust in anything but the true God and his Christ is to worship a false god. For example, Jesus said that you can’t worship God and money (Matt 6:24). This frames how we can relate to our finances as religious and at odds with our confession. Paul says that covetousness is idolatry (Col 3:5). Show me what you covet, and I will show you what you worship. To covet is to wish for another god who would give you the thing/person you are coveting.

Paul also indicted some opponents, “their god is their belly” (Phil 3:19). These people probably considered themselves good Christians. But they were actually motivated, says Paul, by a pursuit of physical pleasure. This was their functional god.

To trust in anything other than Christ for your life is to follow a deviant ideology. And it is on this note that 1 John ends. After rehearsing all those benefits, all of the great blessings we have in Christ, after more or less saying that we are in a perfect situation, the epistle ends with this one, last, cautionary message, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

The great sin of ancient Israel was idolatry. All they had to do was trust Yahweh alone, and they would be okay. But it wasn’t easy. Think about it. I can imagine an Old Testament saint saying, “You say I have to give up worshipping Baal? But I believe in Yahweh. I keep the traditions of Israel. I

believe that he redeemed us from Egypt. I believe he gave us his law. I offer him sacrifices and keep his feasts. But my family has always worshipped Baal too. My father did, and the crops were good through his lifetime. So did his father, and his father before him. What if I turn from Baal and the crops fail? I'm sorry, but I just can't take the risk."

Perhaps something analogous to that goes on in our hearts too. I believe in Jesus—and in Social Security. My righteousness comes from Christ—but I need people's approval to feel acceptable. I try not to sin—but I can't resist off-limits physical pleasure. I confess the gospel—but I am unhappy without a spouse. I confess the gospel—but I wish I were married to someone else.

Perhaps it isn't strange at all that after spelling out how perfect our position is in Christ, the last thought in 1 John is the admonition, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

Something to think about.