

Confident before God

1 John 5:13-17

Today we are considering a passage in which John urges us to have confidence in two foundational areas of our relationship with God: Confidence related to eternal life and confidence related to prayer. Maybe you've run into Christians who are self-confident to the point of being prideful. But when John speaks of confidence, he is talking about humble confidence in God. In other words, confidence is a byproduct of genuine faith.

I don't know if you've ever allowed yourself to entertain the possibility that you can be confident before God. But I hope that you leave here today convinced that God Himself wants you to be confident in the way you relate to Him. He doesn't want you to be hesitant and unsure when it comes to eternal life and prayer; he wants you to be confident.

Confident of Eternal Life (1 John 5:13) If you've been with us for this series in 1 John, this verse will be very familiar. It's really the purpose statement for the whole book.

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

John's simple purpose is that those who genuinely **have** eternal life **know** that they have eternal life. If you have children, you want them to have the knowledge that they're loved and accepted and safe in your home, right? You don't want them to think that they're always on probation or that they're just one mistake or sin away from being tossed out on the street. In the same way God wants **HIS** children to know that they are safe and secure in **his** family. If we're his children, he wants us to know that we have eternal life.

We saw last week in verse 12 that eternal life is found exclusively in Jesus Christ:

12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

If you believe that Jesus is the Son of God who took on flesh and blood and died for your sin, you have eternal life. If you have the Son, you have eternal life. Throughout 1 John, we've seen that if you believe in Jesus and have eternal life, something so miraculous happens within you that you'll see evidence of eternal life in the way you live. Specifically, John emphasizes that you will love other believers. Not that it's always easy, but genuine believers have a deep, internal desire to love other believers.

When we started this series I mentioned that there are basically four possibilities related to assurance of salvation.

1. You can have eternal life, and **know** it. That's what John wants for those who believe in Jesus.

2. You can have eternal life but **not** have assurance of your salvation. For a variety of reasons, genuine believers can lack assurance of eternal life. If I'm describing you, I hope that this series has helped bring you that assurance.
3. You can have a **false assurance** of salvation, thinking you have eternal life when you really don't. This is by far the most dangerous condition. 1 John is so valuable because it gives us tangible, specific "tests of life" - what we believe and how we live. If you want to avoid having false assurance you can evaluate what you believe and how you live.
4. Finally, it may be that you **don't have eternal life** and you **know** it. In other words, you're not deceived; you're very clear that you don't know God. The good news is that if you admit to God that you have sinned against him and you believe in Jesus (his death for your sin and his resurrection), God will give you eternal life. Some people have an immediate assurance of eternal life when they believe; other people gain that assurance over time as they see evidence of eternal life in the way they live.

Whatever your condition, this is too important an issue to ignore. I'd encourage you to make it a matter of focused prayer; block out some time to talk with God about the condition of your soul. Meditate on John's statement here in verse 13. John Stott pointed out in his commentary on 1 John that there is nothing presumptuous about seeking to know that you have eternal life because that's John's stated purpose for writing this letter. Rather, what is presumptuous is disbelieving what John has written (i.e., that you can know that you have eternal life).

If you lack assurance of salvation, initiate a conversation with a trusted Christian friend. If you don't have such a friend, let us know and we will put you in touch with someone who can talk with you about assurance of salvation.

Confident in Prayer (1 John 5:14-17) In verses 14 and 15 he talks about prayer in general; then in verse 16 and 17 he talks about one specific type of praying.

14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

John is talking about praying according to the revealed will of God here. He's not talking about trying to guess what God might want in specific situations. . . and that if we happen to guess correctly then God hears us. There's no confidence in that. John is talking about asking for things that are aligned with God's will as revealed in Scripture.

For example, let's say that someone mocks you for your faith and your devotion to Jesus. And they slander you, saying all sorts of things that aren't true about you. So how do you pray in that situation? Do you pray that a tree would fall on their house? Or that they you would be able to come up with the perfect insult that would convince them not to mess with you anymore? Um, no.

So what is the will of God in that situation? In John 15 Jesus told His disciples not to be surprised when people treat them the way they treated Him. In Matthew 5 Jesus said that you're "blessed" when others "revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (5:11); he also said that if you want to be recognized as "sons of your Father in heaven," "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (5:44). In 1 Peter 3:9 we read, "Do not return evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead. . ."

So how might you pray according to the will of God when someone mocks you for your faith? You could pray with thanksgiving because you're "blessed" to experience the fellowship of Jesus' suffering. You could pray for God to soften the hearts of those who slander you. You could pray for opportunities to bless them with words and deeds.

The next question we have to ask is, what type of person actually prays that way? The answer would be **a person of the Word**, a person whose thinking and desires have been shaped by the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures. This is consistent with what Jesus told his followers in John 15:7.

7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Abiding in Christ and letting his words abide in us has such a transformative effect that Jesus says, "Ask away and it will be done for you." Caveat: we don't always know the will of God exhaustively in every situation and we don't abide in Christ and let his words abide in us perfectly; therefore there will be times when we think we're praying according to the will of God but we don't receive what we've asked. We'll talk about this more when we get to verse 15.

But let's not miss how staggering the promise in verse 14 really is:

14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

The promise is that when we pray according to his will, "he/God hears us." Our prayers don't "fall on deaf ears." Our prayers don't bounce off the ceiling (even if it seems like it sometimes). God is attentive to the prayers of his children.

In verse 15 John makes clear that God hears us favorably.

15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

Again, the premise is that we're asking for things that are according to God's will **as best we know it**. There's a sense in which we don't know whether we've prayed according to the will of God until we receive or don't receive what we've asked.

For example, in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed that “this cup might be taken from me” - meaning the crucifixion. But Jesus added, “but not my will but yours be done.” He acknowledged that his request might not be according to the will of God. Or think of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul said that he prayed three times that the thorn would be removed; but instead of granting his request, God gave him grace in the midst of his weakness.

So we need to acknowledge that we don’t (and can’t) know the will of God exhaustively. There will be times when we are convinced that we’re praying according to the will of God when we don’t get what we’ve asked. Even when we have asked according to God’s will, when and how God answers might be very different than what we’ve envisioned.

Over the years I’ve seen people pray for something very, very specific and treat it as a litmus test of whether or not God answers prayer. When their prayer isn’t answered as they’d envisioned it, it’s devastating for their faith. I’m not saying, “Don’t trust God for specific, tangible things.” I’m saying, “Don’t trust in your prayer; trust that God hears you and will answer if what you’ve asked is aligned with his will.” In other words, your faith is in the power and the goodness and of God.

Having said all of that, John’s point is that we can have confidence that God will give us the requests we’ve asked when we pray according to his will. This could be reason #57 why it’s important to saturate our minds with Scripture: so we can have confidence before God in prayer.

In verses 16 and 17 John discusses praying for a very specific issue in the church.

16 If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.

John envisions the scenario in which you see a fellow believer committing a sin. You haven’t heard about their sin second- or third-hand; you have observed it yourself. The sin you observe is “a sin not leading to death.” We’ll talk about what that might mean in a moment, but notice what John says you should do: “he shall ask, and God will give him life.” Do you see what John is doing here? He is giving a specific example of having confidence before God in prayer; he is giving a specific example of praying according to the will of God and receiving the request we have asked of him.

John also mentions that “there is sin that leads to death.” He clarifies, “I do not say that one should pray for that.” John doesn’t forbid praying for the person committing “sin that leads to death.” He’s simply clarifying that he’s not talking about that category of sin when he says, “ask, and God will give him life.” John wanted them/us to know that he’s not promising confidence in prayer if they/we pray for a person who commits “the sin leading to death.”

So what is “**a sin not leading to death**”? And what is “**sin leading to death**”? As you might imagine, there are many different ways of understanding this. This is one of the most debated passages in the New Testament. We don’t have time to go into a very detailed discussion of this, so I will summarize my best understanding of this. I readily admit that the view I take has some difficulties; I just think it has the fewest difficulties of all the options.

I think that the “sin leading to death” is basically the sin of those John has been warning about throughout 1 John. I think that the sin leading to death is rejecting the gospel and trying to persuade others to do the same. John called such persons antichrists (because they are aggressively anti-Christ). Therefore, only a hardened opponent of the gospel can commit the sin leading to death (eternal, spiritual death).

Even though John suggests that we shouldn’t have confidence in praying for such persons, it doesn’t mean that we can’t or that God would never hear such prayers. At the end of Acts 7 Stephen prays for those who were stoning him to death. Two chapters later we have recorded how one of his persecutors, Paul, experienced eternal life in Christ. We can’t say with certainty that Paul’s conversion was a direct answer to Stephen’s prayer, but I find the example intriguing.

I think that “a sin not leading to death” is any sin that a genuine believer in Jesus commits. John has established repeatedly that “whoever has the Son has eternal life” (1 John 5:12). When we sin we don’t forfeit eternal life; our sin doesn’t lead to eternal, spiritual death. When we sin we experience conviction by the Holy Spirit, we humble ourselves and confess our sin to God (who is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us), and then keep walking in the light.

This leads us back to the point John is making in this verse: When we see fellow believers commit some sin, the first/primary thing we do is pray for them. We don’t gossip about them. We don’t get in their face with angry and judgmental words. We pray to our heavenly Father who has the power to restore and give life. Eventually, after we’ve done business with God about our own motives and about analogous sins in our lives (Matthew 7), we approach the sinning person with gentleness (Galatians 6:1-2) in order to restore them. But John’s point is that we should “ask, and God will give him life” - a deeper experience of eternal life.

This is something we can begin practicing immediately. Chances are that you will see a fellow believer commit some sin this coming week. This verse suggests that your prayers might be the very thing that prompts God to do a deep work in their life. This is one more way we see the interdependence God has built into the body of Christ. God works in your life partially in response to the prayers of other people.

I think verse 17 is one more assurance to believers that when we sin we don’t forfeit eternal life.

17 All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

Even though our sin grieves God, for the believer our sin doesn't cut us off from eternal life. God practices what he preaches: he not only tells us to forgive one another; he also forgives us (Ephesians 4:32, Matthew 18:22).