

## Victory in Jesus

Last week we began a short sermon series based in the letters of the Apostle John, focusing on what Authentic Christianity looks like. I hope that many of you were able to read 1 John in the past week, as it is a wonderful letter full of encouragement and instruction for the people of God; our series will only cover 4 of the many options of study found in this short book.

We started last Sunday by looking at the adoption we have because of the Grace and work of Jesus Christ; to be called the Children of God. To take on such a character, such a name, can be the work of a lifetime, commonly referred to as Sanctification in the Church. In an effort to encourage this new life found in Jesus, we understood it as a process of Becoming rather than simply Changing. That process is the move from a life of sin to a life of freedom found only in Jesus Christ, and we looked at **4 characteristics found in the life of someone who is Born Again:**

- 1) A love for Jesus.
- 2) A desire to be holy.
- 3) A holistic witness.
- 4) A desire to share and tell others about Jesus.

This week we continue to see John's focus on being Born of God and what comes with that designation. In my small group study on this book, Ron Blankley notes that, "Christians with a variety of theological views have wholeheartedly sung the

words to the well-known hymn: 'Faith is the victory! Faith is the victory! O glorious victory, that overcomes the world.' But in light of the daily battles in the Christian life, not all agree on what this victory is, when it is accomplished, or how we go about achieving it." I'm sure that any of us who have spent a good amount of time going to church have heard at least one message about victory, and how a Christian should consider themselves victorious over all that happens in their life, no matter how they see it theologically. It is truly a glorious message to hear...

**But, you know**, I have heard that sermon at times in my life where the last thing I have felt is victorious. I have heard that sermon at times in my life where the last thing I needed to hear is, "you have the victory!" I have heard that sermon at times in my life where I was at my very darkest and it was all I could do that Sunday morning to get out of bed and walk into a church where smiling, conversation people would be asking me questions and offering condolences and the like. For me, the definition of what "victory" and "overcoming the world" are very personal and cannot be used lightly in the lives of friends, family, congregants, or strangers; either at church or one-on-one. Sometimes our pain is just too present. Sometimes our grief is just too fresh. Sometimes our circumstances are just too out of control to even grasp that we have victory.

In preparing for this message I spent quite a bit of time reading and listening to what other pastors have said about these

passages and about the idea of overcoming the world through the victory we have as people of faith in Christ Jesus. While I often do that as I prepare to write a sermon, this time I needed to do so, because I have a hard time hearing about being victorious when life circumstances can be downright horrible. And I know I'm not the only one. Maybe you have heard the message that we are to live each day as one who has victory over whatever may happen in our lives. Maybe you have heard the message about overcoming at the point where your deepest loss has just occurred. Maybe you have gone to church to hear a message of comfort, and hope, and permission to being feeling the way that you are that day.

Maybe you have... I know that I have. And that can cast a shadow over our faith. When we hear the message of victory but feel nothing but defeat, it can sow doubts in our mind and worry in our hearts that we might not be the Christian we thought we were. But let me tell you, brother, sisters, strangers, friends, that is not the end of the story; it is not the final note in the score of your life. Because the victory is indeed that of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, and His is the way that overcomes the world of sin, of corruption, of delusion, and of defeat. "If you struggle and do not feel like a victorious Christian that very may well be the normal pattern of the Christian life." We don't have to feel victorious to know that Jesus Christ has won the battle for the life and soul of every person who has ever lived and ever will! As Children of God, we do indeed inherit life eternal by the grace of our faith in

Jesus. I want to reassure anyone who has ever felt distanced or unsure that there will be times where we feel lost and alone. But it doesn't have to stay that way, and it shouldn't.

Last week we heard the encouragement about being people who *become* who we are supposed to be. That doesn't often happen overnight. Salvation **happens in the first moment** we put our trust in the man with the nail-scarred hands who took our place the Cross of sin, death, and lies. Sanctification – the journey of growing closer to God, the journey of shedding our skins of sin and death, the journey of taking on the characteristics of Christ Himself – take a life of movement toward Him. And many of us have to take detours that take us to nowhere but pain before we get back on the path that leads us back to God.

**Chuck Girard, of the '70s band Lovesong**, wrote a song titled *Little Pilgrim* that speaks intimately into this situation. Some of the lyrics of that song that has touched so many lives reads as such:

“My search for good and truth had its beginning  
You take a little turn to the left  
And you see what that path has to offer you  
Then you gotta make it back to the main road anyhow  
And you have all that lost time to make up for  
And it's a sad thing... to realize  
That you're all alone, that you're on your own again...”

“Little Pilgrim, walking down the road of life  
I know that deep down in your heart that you are just like me  
What you're seekin' is a better way  
And you're reachin' out for temporary resting places  
And you're glad to find a little peace of mind here and there  
But it won't last no, no, cause you'll have to move along  
someday  
'Til you're resting in the arms of the only one who can help you  
'Til you give your heart and your soul and your body  
And your mind and your life to the Lord...”

All that being said, **today's passage in 1 John**, the disciple that Jesus loved really helps to clear up some of our confusion about faith. He doesn't leave us alone in our questions and doubts or even in our confidence and surety. John reminds us that, “first and foremost, overcoming faith is centered in a correct understanding of who Christ is. In the opening five verses of this passage, John demonstrates how belief, obedience, and love for God and fellow believers are all related.”

What is the nature of true Christian faith? We start with what the Word of God has to say. Please open your Bibles again to 1 John 5, and read along with me, starting in v.1. **Everyone who believes** that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. <sup>2</sup> By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. <sup>3</sup> **For the love of God** is this, that we

obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, <sup>4</sup> for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

*Prayer of Illumination*

“Father, bless the reading and preaching of your Word. And assist us now by your Spirit to see Jesus and to acknowledge Him as both Lord and Christ, and to live lives worthy of that name. We pray this in His name. Amen.”

**John Piper, in his sermon** on these few short verses, tells us this: “So the train of thought goes like this: The new birth happens as we are brought into contact with the living and abiding word, the gospel. The first effect of this new birth is that we see and receive God and his Son and work and his will as supremely beautiful and valuable. That’s faith. This faith overcomes the world, that is, it overcomes the enslaving power of the world to be our supreme treasure. Faith breaks the enslaving spell of the world’s allurements. By doing that, faith leads us into obedience with freedom and joy. God and his holy will look beautiful and not burdensome. The new birth has taken the blinders off. We see things for what they are. We are free to obey with joy. Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”

That's it. That's actually his whole sermon on this passage. Well, if it's good enough for the 5000-person congregation of Bethlehem Baptist, then we can stop right here and get an early seat on lunch over **at Taco Church** down the road.

Piper gives us a good summation of John's message, but we're here to explore these words a bit deeper. We're here to learn about authentic Christianity and how being born again transforms our lives, whether just beginning our walk with Christ, or having been in the family of faith for our whole lives. Because if we are born again we will believe that Jesus is the Christ. We will confess the Son of God and receive Him. We will possess the Spirit of God. We will listen to the whole Word of God in Scripture. We will walk as Christ walked. We will practice righteousness. We will love others that hate us. We will obey the commands given to us by Jesus. We will overcome the world.

**Now this is a lot to take in.** It is certainly a lot to live into. It can certainly seem overwhelming if we take this to mean that if you're born again in Christ, you're perfect; that if I am born again I won't ever sin again; that there is no defeat in living our lives as Christians; that there is only victory from now on. But, John is as explicit as any writer in the New Testament that this is not the case: we - that is Christians - are not perfect. We are not sinless. In the first chapter of his letter, John reminds us that "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and

the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” John is quite clear in his message to the church that being born again does not mean walking flawlessly. It means that, when we do stumble, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit causes us to see it and confess it and move forward with Jesus as our everlasting Lord, Savior, and Brother.

We are not now perfect as Christ is perfect. Last week we read that “we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.” Our salvation, our life in Jesus, gives us a new confidence, a new endurance to walk toward becoming who we are meant to be. But that endurance is not the cause of our new birth. The new birth is the cause of endurance, and endurance is the evidence of authentic Christianity. Endurance is the result of the Victory we have in Christ Jesus as His followers.

**Once when I was working** on my undergraduate degree in ministry, I was waiting at a coffee shop with a friend to buy my favorite sugary latte and we were talking about our classes and the process of becoming a pastor. The cashier overheard our conversation and told us she thought our goal was a good one. At this one of us asked her, “Do you go to church around here?” She replied, “No. But I am a believer.” She pointed to her heart and explained, “What I believe is in here.” This young

woman's perspective of faith is a common one, especially in the Pacific Northwest, the land of the "nones" (no affiliation with a religious institution). Many people believe *in* something. The Pew Research Center tells us that 65% of Americans claim a Christian faith of some sort. A recent Gallup Poll shows that only 47% belong to some sort of house of worship. To most souls in our society "faith" is an abstract idea, often based on some personal experience that provided a glimpse of meaning to life. But this is not how the Bible talks about 'faith.' The Apostle John's definition is so different. Look at the first part of verse and notice that it *does not* read, "Everyone who believes [in whatever or whoever] has been born of God," rather it reads, "Everyone who believes *that Jesus is the Christ* has been born of God."

**Biblically, faith** is not some abstract and internal idea. It is "not the subjective experience of believing" that matters most in the matters of faith; rather it is the object of our faith. Is Jesus and Jesus alone the object of your faith? Do you believe that He is the Christ? And do you believe He is the Son of God? Pastor John Seward reminds us that, "if your faith does not have an object and if that object (or in this case, that person) is not Jesus, as He is identified in Scripture, then whatever you may call yourself, you ought not to take upon the name 'Christian,' for a Christian, first and foremost, has faith in Christ; he or she believes that Jesus is God's one and only Son and that He was anointed by God's Spirit to preach the gospel, heal the sick, raise the dead, die on the cross for sin,

and rise from the dead to become the Savior - the Savior of all who trust in Him.”

This is where we saw the split in John’s letter last week as well: Authentic Christians and those who merely put on the name of Christian. A no-strings-attached faith in Jesus sounds really quite nice. It sounds nice and easy. Ask me just one question: Do you believe in Jesus? “Sure, I do. But stop there. No further questions, please. Don’t ask me about my life, about the way I live. Don’t ask me, ‘Are you loving both God and neighbor?’ And please, whatever you do, please don’t ask me about obedience. Don’t you dare raise that question, ‘Are you keeping the commandments of God?’”

Pastor Sewell goes on to say that, “American Christianity is a thousand miles wide and an inch deep because such questions are left unasked (and thus unanswered). Well, thankfully, the apostle John’s message is more than a one-moment confession of faith without a moment-by-moment, daily attestation of love and obedience.” Here’s a decent summary of all that is stuffed between the first part of verse 1 and the last part of verse 5 of today’s passage. John fills in this frame of faith with love and obedience. “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.” Love and obedience are not optional extras. They are not the deluxe addition of Christian faith. No, they are the necessary results of authentic, transforming

faith... one cannot say, "I love God," and then blatantly break God's rules.

**Tina Turner once sang**, "What's love got to do with it, got to do with it, what's love but a second hand emotion." Well, in the Bible love is certainly not a second-hand emotion, but neither is it a mushy, sentimental emotional experience, a feeling that is empty of moral content. In Scripture love is always defined with its activity, especially the activity of obedience; obedience to what God has revealed.

**The Book of Confessions**, the first part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church includes the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and the eighty-second question asks this: "*Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God? Answer: No mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.*" Scripture teaches that we cannot perfectly keep God's commands, and so we are not able to use obedience as the way to righteousness before God. But that aspect of the commandments is not what John is addressing in these letters. The idea packed in here is not that Christians keep the commands perfectly, but rather characteristically. This is the glory of living under the Grace and in the Victory found only in Jesus our Lord!

**I heard it said once** that if we poorly pronounce the Greek word for "victory" – ni,kh (knee/kay) – we get the name of the

global company Nike. And perhaps, like me, it would do some of us benefit to buy a pair of running shoes to remind us that we can do it, not “just do it”, but do it through God’s past victory in Christ and His present power given by the Spirit. I mean what’s all the fuss about Jesus and obedience really about? What’s at stake here? Can’t I just have my personal Jesus and you have your personal Jesus? Well, God’s Word states quite definitively that if we don’t accept God’s testimony about Jesus, then we not only make Him out to be “a liar,” but we also do “not have life.” Friends, right thinking about Jesus and our new life found in Him is a matter of life and death. How do we know if we are of the faith, if we are truly Christians? We know we are saved if our faith acknowledges and accepts the testimony of God through the Spirit concerning Jesus.

**1 John was written** in order that we might have confidence. It is not meant to make us doubt. It is meant to make us discerning, and through discernment to have confidence. John’s letter summarizes that we are children of our heavenly Father. There are false teachers out there. Don’t listen to them. Be confident in your position in Christ and the power of His Word. Don’t run after sin; run to Christ. Walk *with* Christ. And as we do, then we will begin to live into the victory that is His only, and with it, we will conquer the world as those born again in Christ Jesus.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

### Charge & Benediction

May these words from Pastor Kevin DeYoung be our charge today: “This message is fundamentally all about Christ. Am I in Christ? Do I cling to Christ? Do I run to Christ? Am I being conformed to the image of Christ? As you are conformed to the image of Christ you will say, I love righteousness. I hate sin. I desire to please my Father. I trust his goodness. I believe that greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”

And now may Christ go before you to guide you, behind you to encourage you; beside you to befriend you; above you to watch over you; and within you to give you peace.