

The Faith That Overcomes

1 John 5:1-5

When Shah Jahan's favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal, died in 1631, he commissioned the building of an elaborate mausoleum to house her tomb as a monument of his undying love for her. That mausoleum is the magnificent Taj Mahal, considered one of the Wonders of the World.

It is said that several years into the Taj Mahal's construction the Shah's grief for his wife gave way to a passion for the building project, and that her tomb was misplaced. To this day there is still uncertainty about where Mumtaz is actually buried. The Shah may have gotten so caught up in the building of the monument, that he forgot the one in whose honor the monument was built!

In many ways the building of the church is the exact opposite of the building of the Taj Mahal. First of all, there is NO uncertainty about where Jesus Christ is buried - the tomb is empty and he is risen from the dead as we celebrated last week! The church isn't a mausoleum erected as a monument to the dead, but a living testimony to a living Savior! But there is one way that the Taj Mahal's story can be a lesson and a warning to us: just as Shah Jahan got so caught up in the building of the monument that he forgot the central purpose of the monument, we can get so caught up in the "stuff" of church that we forget the central purpose of the church: Jesus. It's so easy for us to get so focused on peripheral stuff like:

- Styles of worship
- Social and cultural issues
- Biblical values and principles
- Evangelism
- Church government (that's for the church policy wonks among us)
- Relationships within the church and loving one another

All of these things are good things and important things and they all have their place. But their place can't be at the center. Only Jesus belongs at the center. Sometimes our Christian faith can get so complicated and cluttered that we misplace the beautiful simplicity of believing in Jesus. Just believing in Jesus.

John's purpose in this passage isn't complicated. At its core it's a simple reminder to us of the beauty and power and life that comes to us when we believe in Jesus. In fact, John begins and ends this section focused on belief in Jesus:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God...(vs. 1)

Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (vs. 5)

John is probably remembering the time when Jesus asked the disciples, *who do you say I am?* He's asking them what they believe about him. Peter answered for the twelve when he said, *"You are the Messiah (the Christ), the Son of the living God.* John echoes this two part confession: those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah are born of God, those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God overcome the world.

The most important thing about a person is what they believe about Jesus. Eternal destinies are shaped by what we believe about Jesus. All the blessings of spiritual life flow into our lives when we believe in Jesus.

This morning, maybe your life has gotten somewhat cluttered, and maybe even your Christian faith feels a little crowded and complicated. Let's take a deep breath, clear away everything else, and contemplate the circle of spiritual life that comes to us as we believe in Jesus.

1. *Belief leads to new birth (vs. 1)*

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God...

Jesus told Nicodemus that unless a person is born again, they cannot see the kingdom of God. But how do we get born again? That was the question Nicodemus asked that night: "*how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*"

They say there's no such thing as a dumb question, but Nic asks a really dumb question. I don't mean to disrespect the guy, but the whole idea of a person climbing back into their mother's womb is preposterous. That ship has sailed. But his first question, *how can a man be born when he is old?* is a good question. John answers it here: by believing in Jesus Christ. *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God...*

When did you first believe in Jesus? I was in high school when I began to believe. It was a journey for me – I didn't understand so much at first, but what I knew was, I believed in Jesus. John tells us that belief in Jesus leads to new birth – being born again as God's children. Belief leads to new birth. And if we are born of God and God is our Father, we will love everyone born of the Father. We are family!

I love that John uses the word *everyone*. No one is excluded from this invitation. No one is beyond the reach of the kingdom of God and Jesus isn't beyond the reach of anyone. If you have never believed in Jesus, he extends this invitation to you: do you want to be born again into the family of God? There's only one way, but there is one way: believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. It's open for everyone who will believe. Belief leads to new birth.

2. *New birth leads to obedience motivated by love (vv. 2-3)*

When you were born (the first time), whether you knew it or not you signed on to do some very specific things. You've got to eat. Not optional. You've got to drink. You've got to sleep. You've got to breath. These are things you have to do to stay alive. They are commandments required to live. At the same time, these are all things we want to do too. I was talking to someone several years ago and he said he didn't care what he ate because he got no enjoyment out of eating. It didn't matter to him if he ate a turnip or a filet mignon, an apple pie or a week old piece of bread. Eating was a chore he needed to do rather than something he enjoyed doing. That ain't me! I love to eat (probably too much!). There are certain things God has made it necessary for us to do to stay alive but those things aren't burdens, they are pleasures. We love to breath! Hold your breath for a couple minutes and nothing will taste so sweet to you as air. We enjoy sleeping. Some of you might be enjoying a few winks right now – wake up!

New birth leads us to love God and obey His commandments, which are to love one another. But all this isn't a burden. It's not a chore-list that we need to get through. Ps. 19 speaks of the life-giving joy that the commands of the Lord brings to us:

*The law of the Lord is perfect,^[a]
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple;*

⁸ *the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes;*
⁹ *the fear of the Lord is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules^[a] of the Lord are true,
and righteous altogether.*
¹⁰ *More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.*
¹¹ *Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward. Ps. 19:7-11*

Does this sound like a check list of things the psalmist has to do? No, his soul delights in the commandments of God. They are so good for the soul. The more God's spiritual life flows through us, the more we will want to love God more than anything else in life and love one another. We don't have to, we get to. There is joy in it.

This doesn't mean it's always easy to love others. Let's face it, some people are harder to love than others. If you're thinking of someone specifically right now, don't glance over at them. But the stronger our love for Christ, the more we will be able to love people we'd never thought we'd be able to love. Jesus needs to be at the center of our love. In fact, John says something in verse 2 that almost seems like he got the order wrong:

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. Vs. 2

We've heard him say that we know we love God because we love each other but it's odd to hear him say we know we love each other because we love God. The truth is, we can't love each other the way God wants us to unless we love God first and foremost. As important as it is in the church for us to love one another, we can't make the mistake of putting loving people at the center – only love for God can be at the center.

Many churches today are trying to keep up with the cultural trends by making a big deal out of their love for people. The church should love and embrace everyone. But if we untether our love for people from our love for God and commitment to obey His commands, our love for people will go bad. God is love and the source of all love. If we are not loving God, we cannot love one another with a true love. Our love will go bad because we can't generate love, we can only reflect love. God is the sun who radiates love, we are the moon who reflects His love. By this we know that we love God's children: when we love God and obey Him. Our love for one another flows from our love for God (which flows from His love for us). So new birth leads to obedience motivated by love. The progression continues:

3. *Belief leads to new birth leads to overcoming the world*

Three times in two verses John uses the phrase "overcome the world".

- *For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world (vs. 4)*
- *And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith (vs. 4)*

- *Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (vs. 5)*

When we hear the term, overcoming the world, it might conjure up the image of us fighting the world. Us against them. Lock the doors, bar the windows, we're not going down without a fight! But Jesus didn't seem to be in mortal combat with his day. He was always amongst the people. He enjoyed eating and laughing and all that stuff this world has to offer. What does John mean when three times he says we overcome the world?

I want to suggest a different image than the battlefield to illustrate how our faith overcomes the world. When the RMS Titanic sank, those who were in the lifeboats rowed as far away from the boat as possible out of fear of being sucked under. Although Mythbusters claims to have debunked the idea that a sinking ship has a sucking effect, many (including me) think their experiment was faulty because they used a tiny 25 foot boat to replicate a massive 900' ocean liner. Regardless there are other dangers as well, such as getting caught in the rigging and pulled under, water rushing in to fill the many air pockets in a large boat, and the water above a sinking ship becoming so aerated it is impossible to stay afloat in it.

The world is going down. It is doomed – but it has this odd compulsion to pull as many people down to destruction as possible. We live with the sucking pull of the devil, the world, and our flesh – all of which are doomed. The devil's going down. The sinful flesh is going down. The world is going down. There is no question about that. Overcoming the world means we don't go down with it – it means getting free from its sinking pull. Whether a sinking ship can pull a person under might be debatable, but there is no doubt that this world has a massively powerful pull – sinful desires chain us to its doomed voyage and there's nothing we could do about it.

But Jesus has the power to set us free. Jesus says in John 16:33 *Take heart! I have overcome the world.* It's faith in Christ that tethers us to Christ's victory and cuts the tether to this world setting us free from its deadly undertow. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who *believes* that Jesus is the Son of God?

Peter describes this overcoming in terms of escaping the world's corrupting pull in 2 Pet. 1:4

...he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. 2 Peter 1:3-4

Faith sees the beauty and surpassing worth of Christ's promises. Nothing in all the world can compare with knowing Christ. Faith is that inner eye that sees that he is worth more than everything the world can offer. Jesus is more precious than life itself. Faith in Christ keeps him central, not just in priority but in preciousness – he is our life. And faith sees his promises as far better than the promises of the world.

And this is where the daily battle lies for us. If you are trusting in Christ, you are a child of God and you have been saved from the doom of the world, the flesh, and the devil by the saving power of Christ.

But every day we need to fight for faith. Because the world promises us things. Money can make us happy – promise. Lust can make us happy – promise. Stoking our pride can make us happy – promise. Sinful desires promise great things, then pulls us down into misery and bondage. They don't deliver what they promise. Christ's promises are far, far better but every day we need to fight for faith so that we can see the infinitely greater value in his promises and daily overcome the sucking power of the world and

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our sinful desires in order to live for Christ and his eternal purposes. As John Piper puts it, that we fight the promise of sin with a greater promise: the promises of Christ.

Let's not misplace Jesus from the center of our lives. Let's not allow the clutter of everything else – even good things – to cause us to lose sight of his surpassing worth. Let's make it our priority and goal this week to meditate on the preciousness of his promises. Let's make it our prayer that our souls see his worth. That with eyes of faith we catch a glimpse of how much better Christ is, and how much better his promises are, than everything else in the world, even more precious than life itself.

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? Vv. 4-5