

Overcoming The World

1 John 5:1-5

With Study Questions

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I. Born Again

“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him” (1 John 5:1).

Born Again Christian?

During the Carter administration, the president gave an interview in which he described himself as a born-again Christian. The phrase ‘born again’ gained a great deal of momentum and has been used to describe anyone who has a renewed sense of being or purpose or talent, etc..

During the past thirty or so years there is even a sect or group of Christians who have seized the term for their very own. They call themselves ‘born again Christians’. The conversations I have had with these people usually goes something like this: They ask, “Are you a Christian?” To which I answer, “Yes.” To which they respond, “But are you a born again Christian?” Which I have come to understand to mean something like, “But do you really mean it?” or “Are you really into it?”

Of course we must understand the phrase, ‘born again Christian’ to be redundant. For in no uncertain terms did Jesus proclaim, in John chapter three, that if one is not born again, they most certainly are not a Christian. But we must also avoid relegating the idea of being born again to some small group of Christians who think they are better at it than others, or who have mastered the art of incoherent babbling, howling or being unnecessarily annoying to others. I don’t mean to be unduly harsh toward youthful enthusiasm. But it has been my observation that much of the ridicule I notice leveled against the Christian faith is on account of bad theology or a questionable attitude rather than the offense of the gospel itself.

Are You Born Again?

Twice in the first five verses of 1 John 5, John uses the idea he heard Jesus use in His evening discussion with Nicodemus, that is the idea of being born again or born of God. As stated earlier, being born again is not a title for some unique type of Christian. It is what must be the case for anyone who truly is a Christian. And contrary to popular belief, being born again is not something someone does. Jesus did not tell Nicodemus to go get born again. He simply stated what must be the case in order to see and enter the kingdom of God. So

the first question before us this morning is, “are you born again and how do you know?”

Jesus is the Christ

The answer to these questions are found in verse one. John teaches us that one who is born of God believes Jesus is the Christ. 1 John 2:22 teaches that a denial of this is of antichrist. When Jesus quizzed Peter as to who He was, Peter responded by saying, **“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** This might not mean much apart from an Old Testament understanding of the Messiah but in short, a person who is born again believes that Jesus is the anointed one of God. He is the one appointed by the Father to fulfill all the promises given to restore and redeem the human race and all of creation. It is a very specific belief that Jesus Christ is a very specific person who is both God and Man. He is the Christ, the Deliverer, the Lamb of God and man’s only hope. A person who is born of God believes this.

Love the Begotten

It is of interest to note that along with belief in Jesus comes an assumption that the born again person has a love for God. And finally John points out that the person who loves Him who begot (or births people who are born again) also loves him who is begotten (the people who are birthed.)

So this is how you know if you are born again. If you believe in Jesus and love others it is a sign that you are born of God.

II. Keeping Commandments

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments” (1 John 5:2).

Law or No Law

Approximately every third week in our church service we, as a congregation, quote the Ten Commandments. Many Christians view the idea of having the Ten Commandments posted on public walls and in classrooms, etc., as a good thing. Yet at the same time there seems to be huge movements in Christendom to dismiss the Ten Commandments as overbearing and part of an economy that should not be foisted upon today’s Christian. Recently the founding pastor of our church was ridiculed by a caller because of his belief that the law of God should be obeyed. The caller mockingly exhorted him to, “get into the New Testament.” I must point out that 1 John is in the New Testament.

Love Others by Loving God

In verse two we learn that a proper, godly love for others cannot exist apart from a love for God. We are properly loving others when we have God as the primary object of our love. How does this work?

If the reason I love others has as its primary source something other than God then it is vacillating and on shaky ground. If I love my wife because she is cute, or clever, or humorous, etc., there is always a chance that days will come when she won't appear to be all those things to me. If my love for her is built on those things, it will therefore ebb.

Even if I love my wife from a settled disposition to do so based upon my own integrity, she will not safely continue in my love because the character of men is apt to change. But the born again person will always recognize that God is worthy of our love. Therefore, when one resolves to love others based upon their conviction of a love for God, the foundation of that love cannot be shaken. This does not ensure that a Christian will never fail. But it does assure that there is no justifiable reason for that failure.

Love by Keeping Commandments

In verse three John adds to this. The love in question is not a love that can be defined any way we see fit. True love for God is always accompanied by the keeping His commandments. Some may say they love God and ignore His commandments. This is hypocrisy. Some may seek to keep His commandments merely from a servile fear or a means to gain His favor. This is a sign of being spiritually dead. We are to love Him and keep His commandments. As the next verse indicates.

**“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.
And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).**

This verse shows that there is no love of God apart from keeping His commandments. As Jesus so clearly indicates in John 14:15, **“If you love Me, keep My commandments.”**

Law—Good or Evil?

In one respect we understand, as the Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 7, that the law kills and is a minister of death. But David teaches Psalm 119:103 (and in every other verse of Psalm 119) that the law is sweeter than honey to his lips. Is this a contradiction. May it never be! The answer is quite simple. Paul compares the law to our corrupt nature. David demonstrates how a believer should feel and think toward the beauty of God's wonderful law.

The point here is that the law is not a burden. Therefore any understanding of the law being a burden is wrong. And any feeling that the law is a burden must be quelled.

Learning to paint or sing or dance may be difficult. And in doing so you may discover a lack of talent you never knew you had. But the endeavor is not a burden (unless the command is to dance perfect or die¹.) Nor is it futile for, at very least, you will a better painter or singer or dancer than you previously were, not to mention developing a greater appreciation of the arts.

III. Overcoming

“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4).

Victorious Language

In the next two verses we will see the phrase ‘overcome the world’ used three times. This will remind some of the exhortation Jesus gives to the seven churches in Revelation to overcome. Paul teaches us in Romans 8 that we are more than conquerors. This is very victorious language and quite frankly I don’t know too many who name the name of Christ, sitting in seats one would normally associate with conquest.

Of all the kings, presidents and popes, I don’t spot a sound Christian in the lot. And although my eschatology would lead me to believe that one day we shall see the Godly rule and the people blessed, it certainly isn’t the widespread case presently before us. And no matter how optimistic you choose to be, there is little argument against the fact that John was writing at a time of severe spiritual darkness. Yet he still indicates that the overcoming had already taken place. How can this be?

Born—Overcome—Obey

John seems to equate being born of God with overcoming the world. The “whatever” is in the neuter gender (rather than saying “whoever”) which conveys a general idea of the overcoming power of Christ regarding anything. But the conjunction “for” at the beginning of the verse connects this with keeping God’s commandments. We might see verses three and four unfold this way: people who are born of God will have a desire and inclination to obey the commandments of God rather than the desires of the flesh, thus demonstrating that they have overcome the world (the world representing everything that is contrary to the goodness of God.)

¹ Christians are not under a covenant which threatens, ‘dance perfect or die.’ Christians are not under the law of sin and death. But they are still called to dance.

Faith that Overcomes

John then makes a somewhat blanket statement of conquest, “...**this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.**” Is John saying that the personal faith I exercise has overcome the world? I don’t wish to quell any Christian megalomaniacs we may have in the group but I tend to think that John is not speaking of faith in that way.

What John is teaching here is not so much our personal faith but the Christian faith. In other words, the work of Christ has overcome the world. Here it might be valuable to understand two definitions of faith: *Fides qua creditur*—*the faith by which (it) is believed*; i.e., the faith of the believer that receives and holds the revelation of God, *fides* subjectively considered and *Fides quae creditur*—*the faith which is believed*; i.e., the content of faith as revealed by God, *fides* objectively considered.²

My personal faith may be shaky. But the Christian faith has overcome the world. So where does my personal faith come into play? I would say in the next verse.

Personal Allegiance

“Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God” (1 John 5:5)?

Here we see *fides qua creditur*—the faith by which it is believed. Since the Christian faith has overcome the world, one must give personal allegiance to that faith in order to participate in the victory. Here the allegiance is explained as believing that Jesus is the Son of God which, as we learned earlier, carries with it a love of God a love of others and a conviction to obey His commands.

Moses

We see recorded in Exodus 32 an event which directly followed Moses’ encounter with God.

“And Moses turned and went down from the mountain, and the two tablets of the Testimony were in his hand. The tablets were written on both sides; on the one *side* and on the other they were written. ¹⁶ Now the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets. ¹⁷ And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “*There is a noise of war in the camp.*” ¹⁸ But he said: “*It is*

² Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, (Baker Book House, 1985) p. 117.

not the noise of the shout of victory, Nor the noise of the cry of defeat, *But* the sound of singing I hear.”

¹⁹ So it was, as soon as he came near the camp, that he saw the calf *and* the dancing. So Moses’ anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ Then he took the calf which they had made, burned *it* in the fire, and ground *it* to powder; and he scattered *it* on the water and made the children of Israel drink *it*. ²¹ And Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought *so* great a sin upon them?” ²² So Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord become hot. You know the people, that they *are set* on evil. ²³ “For they said to me, ‘Make us gods that shall go before us; *as for* this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ ²⁴ “And I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, let them break *it* off.’ So they gave *it* to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out.” ²⁵ Now when Moses saw that the people *were* unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to *their* shame among their enemies), ²⁶ then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, “Whoever *is* on the LORD’s side—*come* to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. ²⁷ And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.’ ” ²⁸ So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day. ²⁹ Then Moses said, “Consecrate yourselves today to the LORD, that He may bestow on you a blessing this day, for every man has opposed his son and his brother.”

³⁰ Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. So now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin” (Exodus 32:15-30).

This is quite a dramatic portrayal. But evil, and the allies of evil, will be judged. And make no mistake about it, a godless society inevitably degenerates into an evil society. When a calf (or any other created thing—including yourself) is your god, there is ultimately no reason to pursue righteousness. In fact righteousness cannot be known. But when one takes rank with the Lord, even amidst great evil, he will find atonement for his sin. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

Questions for Study

1. Is it possible to be a Christian and not be born again?
2. Is being born again something we should tell people to do?
3. How do you know if you a born again?
4. How do we know we are properly loving others?
5. Why is it important to love others by loving God first?
6. Why is the keeping of the commandments an important aspect of loving others?
7. Is the law good or evil?
8. How could David and Paul have such differing views on the law? Or do they?
9. How is the law not burdensome?
10. How could the law be a burden?
11. How do I demonstrate that I am an over-comer?
12. Explains the two types of faith.
13. How do we participate in overcoming the world?
14. Discuss the account in Exodus 32.