

“Whoever Has the Son Has Life”

The Tenth in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

Texts: 1 John 5:1-12; Ezekiel 37:1-14

The Apostle John teaches by repetition. Throughout his first epistle, repeatedly, John has spoken of the way in which we can tell the differences between those who believe that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, and those who do not. John has told us that Christians do not foolishly think that we are without sin, while those who have left the faith do mistakenly think they are without sin. Christians will strive to obey God’s commandments, while those taken in by false teachers are indifferent to the commandments of God. Christians will love their brothers and sisters in Christ, while those outside the church are not interested in demonstrating such love. Christians will strive to avoid worldliness (which is thinking and acting like a non-Christian), while those who have imbibed from the spirit of antichrist treat those who are faithful to the gospel just as Cain treated Abel. And Christians will love the truth, and willingly defend the doctrine that Jesus is God manifest in human flesh in the face of the many antichrists who will inevitably arise and seek to undermine the truth of our Lord’s incarnation. In the fifth chapter of 1 John, the apostle summarizes these familiar themes one final time, before concluding his epistle by returning to his testimony by which we know that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh.

As we continue our series on the epistles of John, we move into the fifth and closing chapter of 1 John—Lord willing, our topic in this sermon and the next. John will once again summarize his main points, before concluding this letter with a powerful assertion of the truth of the gospel, before asking that question which all of us must ask and answer at some point in our Christian lives—“how do we know that we know?” How do we know that Christianity is true? How do we know that our doctrine is correct? Why do we go to such great lengths and self-sacrifice and deny ourselves to live differently than those around us? Why do we drag our weary bones out of bed each Sunday to come to this place, listen to yet another sermon, and stand in line to receive a tiny piece of bread and receive a very small cup of cheap (and way too sweet) wine? How do we know that we know?

The answer to these questions is to be found in the nature of John’s own experience and life as an apostle. In chapter 20 of his gospel, John tells his reader that his purpose in composing that gospel is as follows. “*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*” (John 20:30-31). John has composed his gospel precisely because he wants us to believe in Jesus Christ so that we will have eternal life. John is writing to convince us that Jesus is that one whom John (and the other apostles) claim that he is—God manifest in the flesh. According to John, our Lord’s entire messianic ministry bears witness to his identity as the Son of God. This is evident in Jesus’ teaching, through the fact that he is that one promised throughout the Old Testament, and through his miracles—done in the presence of those who means and motive to expose them if they these things were fake or nothing but magic. But the capstone of John’s case for Jesus is the fact that once crucified, God raised Jesus from the dead. And to all of this—that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh—John is witness.

Likewise, in 1 John 5:13, John states in the closing section of his epistle, “*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.*” Because Jesus was God manifest in the flesh, John’s gospel is true, and his purpose in writing these epistles is to compel his readers to trust in Jesus so that they might know what it means to possess eternal life. John wants

nothing more than for people to believe the gospel and embrace his testimony about the identity of Jesus. But that being said, these epistles are not really evangelistic tracts, rather they are letters written by the Apostle to expose and correct serious doctrinal error.

Before John reminds us that the entire Christian faith stands or falls with the truth of our Lord's incarnation, in verses 1-5 of chapter five John re-states the need for Christians to obey the commandments of the Lord, love our brothers and sisters in Christ, and avoid the contamination of the world. As we have seen in previous sermons, it is absolutely essential that we understand why John speaks the way that he does and why he emphasizes these particular things. John's opponents are a group of heretical false teachers who deny that Jesus is God in the flesh—the very heart of the Christian faith. And because these heretics mistakenly assumed that they had risen above their own sinfulness, they have become completely indifferent to the commandments of God. While we know this teaching to be a form of neo-Gnosticism, John calls this denial of Christ's true humanity and the corresponding antinomianism which springs from it, the spirit of antichrist. If Jesus wasn't God manifest in the flesh, then how could Jesus suffer and die for our sins? Given what these false teachers believe about Jesus—that he was God who only appeared as a man—we shouldn't be surprised by their indifference to how they live their lives.

This is point vital for John, precisely because God is love. God's love is revealed in a very particular way—the cross of Jesus Christ. When Jesus suffers and dies for our sins, Jesus reveals that the essence of God's love for sinners is his own self-sacrifice. When Jesus offers up himself as a propitiatory sacrifice for our sins, we see God's love for a lost and fallen world. Now, if Jesus were not a flesh and blood Savior, then his death is not the supreme manifestation of God's love. Jesus would be nothing but a phantom, merely appearing in the form of a human. And how can the death of a phantom Jesus do anything to save us from our sins? How can the death of such a Jesus be the supreme example of the love of God, which John says is to be present in the churches because God himself is love? To deny that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh is to deny Christianity. It is to mock the cross of Christ.

But since God is love, since God has called us from death to life through the preaching of the gospel, since Jesus has died for us upon the cross as a propitiation for our sins, since Jesus presently intercedes for us before the Father, and since our Lord has given us the blessed Holy Spirit, then all those who are Christ's will indeed manifest some degree of love toward those other folk for whom Christ has died and for whom he is presently interceding. John has made it perfectly clear that if we trust in Christ to save us from our sins, love for others will be present in our midst. And, says John, we can work backwards from the presence of love in our midst to its source—God, who is love.

The application which John makes at the end of chapter four is that love not only casts out fear, the cross of Christ reminds us that the love of God will sustain and deliver us from God's wrath on the day of judgment. John's point is if Christ has died for us—the supreme act of God's love—then we can have confidence for the day of judgment because believers know that Jesus has already faced judgment day for us as he suffers and dies on the cross. This is why in the cross of Jesus Christ we see the love of God and can draw assurance from the fact that in Jesus' death, God's anger toward our sin has been turned aside.

This is all in the background as John begins to conclude his epistle.

Having come this far in our series, we are already quite familiar with those points of contrast John has set forth between those who believe that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh and those who don't. Here in the first five verses of chapter five, John will take them up yet again, only in summary form.

Throughout these verses, John will speak of the noun “faith” and the verb “believe,” three more times he will mention love, and two more times he will speak of the need for Christians to obey God’s commands. By reemphasizing this in this way, John is able to show that all of these things flow out of a correct understanding of the person and work of Christ.¹ Doctrine precedes ethics.

In 5:1, John writes, “*everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.*” Throughout this epistle John has been careful to demonstrate that those things which differentiate Christians from those who have been taken in by the proto-Gnostic docetic heresy, flow out of God’s prior actions in the lives of his people. As John put it in 1 John 4:10, “*in this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*” As noted previously, the indicatives (what we are in Christ) precede the imperatives. In this case, John says, “*everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ,*” that is, everyone who believes that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, *has been born of God.* To the English ear, this sounds like John is saying that everyone who believes in Jesus, as a result, is born again. If true, that completely undermines the Reformed notion that regeneration (being born from above) precedes faith.

But the verb “has been born” is in the perfect tense, while the verb “to believe” is in the present tense. This simply means that the effects of a past act (“being born of God,” i.e., being regenerated) continue on into the present (believing). John is telling us that those who have been born of God live that out by believing (continuously) in Jesus. In other words, those who currently have faith do so, because they were, at one point, ‘born of God.’² As one writer puts it, “believing is the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth.”³ Therefore, John is reminding us that all of those who have been made alive (born of God) through the preaching of the gospel, demonstrate that to be the case by believing. The cause is regeneration and the effect is continuing faith in Christ. This is the way Israel’s prophets often spoke of the coming messianic age—a time when God himself would create new life in people who were dead in sin, the most famous of these images being Ezekiel 37, our Old Testament lesson.

The second clause of this verse reminds that faith is not the only effect of being born of God. “*And everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.*” Those who love the Father are those who have been born of God and who have faith in Jesus. Since Jesus is the object of our faith (faith looks to Jesus, and trusts that Jesus’ death will save us from our sin), and since Jesus is the supreme illustration of what we mean when we say God is love, all those who trust Christ, love the Father (who sent Jesus in the flesh, and who demonstrates his love for us in Jesus’ suffering upon the cross). But all those who love the Father, will love all those to whom the Father has given the new birth. This simply means that the effects of God’s work in making sinners alive in Christ is that they believe the gospel, and they will love their fellow believers. Since God’s work produces very specific results, John’s point is aimed at those who do not believe that Jesus is the Christ (and who believe that he’s God merely appearing as a man). John’s concern is that those who love false teaching do not truly love their brothers and sisters in Christ. Those who have been given the new birth will produce that fruit for which God have given them life. For John is there is a cause and effect relationship.

¹ Stott, The Epistles of John, 174.

² Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 266-267.

³ Stott, The Epistles of John, 175.

Indeed, for John, these effects (faith and love) serve to assure Christians of their salvation. As John writes in verse 2, “*By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.*” We cannot love God without loving his people. We cannot love God’s people without loving God. John sees these things as inseparable. In fact, the presence of this love for God (however weak and frail it may be), and this love for our brothers and sisters in Christ (however tainted it may be by our own sin) is one of the means that we know that we are children of God.

Again, we need to be extremely careful not to attempt to quantify this, as is sometimes done by those in the Wesleyan holiness tradition, by arguing that a certain degree of love must be present for us to be assured of our salvation. John is not talking about the degree of love we must have to be assured of our salvation, but he is saying that the very presence of love for our brothers and sisters (in any degree) assures us of God’s love for us. Those who have been brought from death to life cannot help but love their brothers and sisters. The fact is only a Christian ever worries about whether or not they have loved their brothers and sisters enough. And even a struggling Christian should conclude from this (although this can be a bit counter-intuitive) that God loves them, and therefore they should be certain of God’s favor toward them in Christ. Not one of those people about whom John is warning his reader, has ever once worried whether or not they’ve loved their brothers and sisters enough. Those who are dead in sin will have no true love for their brothers and sisters in Christ. Why do they not love? They remain dead in their sins. They have not been made alive by the word.

One more time, John reminds us that the indicative (our love for God and our brothers and sisters which enables us to know that we are God’s), precedes the imperative. In verse 3, John writes, “*For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.*” Our love for God issues forth in our obedience to God. Love of God is not some sort of sentimental, sappy, emotional experience of the divine. Love for God manifests itself in concrete action—obedience to God’s commandments as set forth in the second table of the law (our duties toward our neighbor). While making the connection yet again between God’s love (the indicative) and our response (obedience to the commandments), John reminds us that the commandments are not burdensome. But in light of the fact the law was given to show us our sin, how can John now say that the law is not a burden?

At this point it is vital to consider the context. John has been writing about those things which flow out of the new birth. These include faith in Christ and love for neighbor. There is no way we can keep the law perfectly—as God demands. But John is assuming (I am sure) Jesus’ death as a propitiation for our sins, which means that his death upon the cross has already turned aside God’s wrath and anger toward us for all of those times that we have broken God’s commandments, including the times we have failed to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. Because of Christ’s death for us, the law no longer condemns us. Furthermore, Jesus kept all of the commandments, perfectly. So those who have faith in Christ are forgiven and reckoned as righteous. It is in that context that John says the commandments are not burdensome. In fact, Jesus himself stated, “*my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*” (Matthew 11:30). This is true, and makes perfect sense, if you understand the distinction between the indicative and imperative (the difference between the law and the gospel). Miss this distinction (or confuse law and gospel), and the words, “*his commandments are not burdensome,*” are simply not true. If you get this wrong, the law is not only a burden, it will crush you into fine dust. As Christians, we must view our obligation to obey the law, through the lens of our Lord’s death and perfect righteousness.

Since John has been reminding his readers of those things which flow out of the new birth (faith, love, obedience), he now adds one more that he mentioned earlier, the need to avoid worldliness. As he states in verse 4, “*For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world.*” Those who are Christ’s

ultimately prevail over the spirit of antichrist, because they have been born of God. The Apostle is not saying what some of our contemporaries will say, “if you overcome the world, as a result, you’ll be born of God.”⁴ The new birth is a supernatural act of God. The world doesn’t like it, doesn’t understand it, and will oppose God’s work of redemption. But because regeneration is God’s supernatural work, God will prevail, and ultimately “the world” can do nothing to stay the hand of God.

As John hammers home this point, in the second part of verse 4 he gets more specific. “*And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.*” While the world (the non-Christian way of thinking and doing) will oppose the gospel, and seek to draw us away from Christ, John reminds us that the new birth issues in faith. And once having trusted in Jesus Christ—having seen in his cross the bloody and costly love of God for us, his people—the world cannot touch us. We may be persecuted, belittled, mocked, and even killed. Yet, in Christ, the victory is already won. The cross has already turned aside God’s wrath, and the empty tomb is the proof that we win in the end. This is the faith that overcomes the world. And so in verse 5, John can ask the rhetorical question, “*Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*” Those who are born of God do indeed believe John’s testimony that Jesus is the Son of God (God manifest in the flesh).

Having summarized those things which flow out of the new birth, John now makes his case that his gospel—and the proper response to that gospel, which is faith—depends upon the validity of his testimony as to that gospel’s truthfulness. In verse 1 of chapter 5, John referred to Jesus as “the Christ,” and in verse 5 as the “Son of God.” Now, in verses 6-12, John speaks a bit more specifically about Jesus’ messianic mission, and how we know that his proclamation about the Christ and the Son of God is true.

In verse 6, John states, “*This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood.*” These verses have perplexed many. Since John doesn’t explain any of his terms, it is likely that his readers were already familiar with them.⁵ A number of commentators, including both Luther and Calvin, have argued that the references to water and the blood are references to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper which confirm the gospel. While it is easy to take water as a reference for baptism, taking “blood” as a reference to the Lord’s Supper is much more of a stretch, making this interpretation unlikely. Another interpretation, held by Augustine and popular in the early church, is that the reference to water and blood is a reference to John 19:34-35, and John’s earlier report that when Jesus died on the cross, both blood and water flowed out of the spear wound in Jesus’ side. But John asserts that what is in view is one “who came” by water and blood, and while water and blood do indeed testify to Christ’s death, it is hard to understand how Jesus came by these two things, if the reference is to his suffering on the cross.⁶

Again, the historical context suggests a helpful solution. Most contemporary commentators understand water and blood as references as aspects of Christ’s messianic mission—the water referring to Christ’s baptism (the point at which he began his messianic mission), with the blood being a reference to our Lord’s death upon the cross (by which he accomplished our salvation). These two key points in the messianic mission of Jesus, emphasize his true human nature, and would be especially powerful as a

⁴ Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 176.

⁵ Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 179.

⁶ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 276.

response to those who were denying our Lord's humanity—like the proto-Gnostics then troubling the churches. But there were other heretics in Ephesus as well—Cerinthus for example. Cerinthus taught that Jesus was a mere man upon whom the divine spirit descended at his baptism, and which departed from Jesus when he died on the cross. While Jesus came to earth from heaven as the God-man (John affirms the truth of Jesus' incarnation and deity in response to Cerinthus), his baptism and death are proof of his true humanity (John's response to the proto-Gnostics). What John is doing then in verse 6, is affirming both Christ's deity and his humanity in the presence of heretics who were denying both.

In the latter part of verse 6, John adds, "*And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.*" As John tells us in his gospel (John 15:26; 16:13), the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. This means that it is the Holy Spirit who testifies to the truth of Jesus' identity as both "the Christ" and as "Son of God." The Holy Spirit is not going to bear witness that Jesus is not truly human, for that would mean that the Spirit is testifying to a lie. It is the Holy Spirit, therefore, who bears witness to us as to the truth of the gospel. In fact, as John goes on to say in verses 7-8, "*For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.*" As many of you know, there is a long history of debate over the original wording of these verses since many late manuscripts insert a reference to the Trinity, which is not found in the best and earliest manuscripts.⁷ That's a debate for another time. John's point is that the three witnesses are in agreement. The Holy Spirit bears witness to the truthfulness of the messianic mission—which began when Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism (water) and which came to its climax when Jesus suffered and died upon the cross (the blood). Thus the Spirit bears witness to the truth of the gospel. The Spirit is therefore not going to reveal or testify to something which contradicts John's testimony about the identity of Jesus, as the neo-Gnostics were claiming.

Now, says John in verse 9, "*If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son.*" No doubt, we accept all kinds of things based upon human testimony and the report of eyewitnesses. How much more should we accept the testimony of God the Holy Spirit who bears witness to the truth of John's testimony about Jesus. John saw Jesus. John heard Jesus. John touched Jesus. And the Holy Spirit bears witness to the truth of John's testimony. This is why John can go on say in verses 10-12, "*Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.*"

John is not making this up as he goes along. He is bearing witness to what he has seen and heard, which he knows first-hand. He is telling the truth. And he knows that anyone who trusts in Jesus has come to believe his testimony is true because the Holy Spirit has confirmed the truth of John's preaching in the person's heart. And since John's preaching is true (and the Spirit bears witness to the truth of it), John can say without any reservation whatsoever that all those who reject his preaching as untrue, or who distort it, are making God out to be a liar. God did these things through the person of Jesus. John knows this to be true and proclaims this Jesus to us. And the blessed Holy Spirit bears witness to the truth of John's testimony. To not believe John's testimony then is to call God liar. No small thing.

God has borne witness of his son Jesus, through the Apostle John, and then confirmed the truth of John's

⁷ See Bruce M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (United Bible Society, 1971), 715, ff.

message in and through the work of the Holy Spirit, so that those who believe John's testimony can be certain that they have eternal life. And this life has been given us by God through John's gospel. Therefore, for John, it all comes down to this. *Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.* It is as simple as that.

By now, our application is very obvious.

BI must now ask you one of the most important questions you will ever be asked. You have heard John's gospel. You have heard John's testimony as to Jesus' true identity—that he is both the Christ and the Son of God. You have heard John's account of what Jesus came to do—die for our sins, turning aside God's wrath from us.

The question then is this. Do you believe John's testimony about Jesus to be true? If you do, then you know that you know, because John is telling us the truth, and the Holy Spirit confirms within us that John's testimony is true. *Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

But if you don't believe John's testimony about Jesus to be true, then I plead with you to reconsider that testimony one more time. Please listen to John with an open mind and consider his testimony very carefully, because it is true. If you do not believe John's testimony, you are calling God a liar, and you are calling into question both God's desire and method to save you from your sins.

We may believe the testimony of men, but never forget that *the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son.*"