

First John: Authentic Faith for Jesus' People

#12: Overcoming the World

1 John 5:1-12

Take a first look.

I. John has reminded us that “the world and its cravings are passing away, but the one who keeps on doing the will of God remains for eternity” (1 John 2:17, FJV¹). This is a keen observation. It reminds us that we live in a temporary state of life right now. We have only so many years, months, and days in this life, before eternity kicks in full force. I read this a few years ago:

“Kirk Cousins, the [former] quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings [who is now with the Atlanta Falcons], has a sculpture outside his house with an odd purpose: it’s intended to remind him that he’s going to die. Well, sort of.

“Planning to live to 90, the quarterback has a jar of 720 stones (one for each month he intends to live) at his home. Each month, he takes a stone out of the jar and carries it with him. He told ESPN’s Tory Zawacki Roy [in 2018] that ‘every month [he’s] going to take out a stone, put it in [his] pocket, and think: “Once this month is over, this is gone. You can’t get it back, it’s gone for good.”’”

“It’s only a little morbid until you remember that, as Cousins takes out the stones, he has a visual reminder—right outside his front door, no less—that his time on Earth is getting shorter and shorter. That may sound morbid at first, but it’s also biblical. The idea actually came to Cousins from a Bible teacher, in response to Psalm 90:12: ‘Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.’ This verse, Cousins says, is ‘about the importance of leaving a mark and making a deposit in people’s lives in a way that matters. In other words, you have an understanding that life is coming to an end someday, and that we only have so many days. There’s wisdom in that.’”²

II. So how are we, whose “days are numbered,” going to overcome this temporary world and lay hold of *eternal* life? John helps us answer this question in the last chapter of his pastoral letter. In Jesus Christ, we have a shot at *overcoming the world*.

Take a closer look at 1 John 5:1-12.

I. Overcoming the world comes as we connect what we believe with how we love (v. 1).

1. Faith in Jesus as the Christ is evidence of being begotten of God. We would have no spiritual life at all apart from our faith in Jesus Christ. It is on that basis that we know that we have been “begotten from God.” This is not a static, one-time matter, like buying a ticket for a bus ride. Rather, it is a life we enter. That first sentence in chapter 5 is telling: “Everyone who *keeps on believing* that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten from God.” This is not a momentary glimpse of the path to eternal life. It is a heart-felt leap into the lighted path that is itself eternal life and that leads to the Resurrection.

¹ FJV = Frank Johnson Version, my own translation of the original text. 😊

² Matt Woodley, Editor, PreachingToday.com: source: Nick Lannon, “You (and Kirk Cousins) Are Going to Die,” Mockingbird blog (11-2-18).

2. *Such faith leads us to express God's love.* Here again, John connects the Truth Test with the Love Test. I translated the second half of verse one like this: "Everyone who keeps on loving the Father also loves the child."

That expression might be more literally understood in this way: "Everyone who keeps on loving the one begetting loves also the one who has been begotten from him." "The one begetting" seems clearly to refer to God the Father Himself. So, who is "the one who has been begotten from him," or more simply, to whom does "the child" refer? Here are two options.

a. "Loving the child," option (1): loving the Son of God, Jesus Christ. This fits with the context, doesn't it? To believe in Jesus means that we have come to love Him for coming to earth as a human baby, living and teaching us the Way of eternal life, dying for our sins, and then conquering death itself in His resurrection. Because we have come to believe in Him as our Savior, we love Him for saving us. But the next option fits the context, perhaps even better.

b. "Loving the child," option (2): loving God's other children, one's fellow-Christians. The next phrase in v. 2 seems to help us understand more fully what John is getting at. He is about to talk about coming to know *that we love the children of God*. So, we love the Father for sending His Son to be the Savior of the world (See 1 John 4:14). But, we must also love whoever else calls upon God as Father on the very same basis of faith. We love the Father; we love His children.

A—This is why John seems to harp on the need to show love to one another in the family of God. It is a clear and necessary evidence for the faith we profess.

I—Our world is shot through with hate, based on ethnicity, geography, and politics. Occasionally, evidence of civility emerges, and it seems to shock us. "At the end of their debate [several years ago], two candidates for a Vermont state House seat asked the moderator for a few extra minutes—not to make last-second appeals for votes, but rather to make a little music. Lucy Rogers, the Democrat, grabbed her cello, while Zac Mayo, the Republican, picked up his guitar. They started performing 'Society' by Eddie Vedder, much to the surprise of everyone in attendance. [Chorus: "Society, you're a crazy breed I hope you're not lonely without me"] 'It strikes a chord,' Mayo told CBS News. 'To say to the world that this is a better way.'

"Rogers and Mayo agreed early on while campaigning in Lamoille County that they were going to be civil and treat each other with respect throughout the race. When Rogers asked Mayo if he wanted to play a song with her, he thought it was a fantastic idea—as did the voters who attended the debate."³

Take note, my friends. I realize that the divide between political parties has certainly widened in recent years. Admitting this, if these folks campaigning against each other for political office can be civil to each other, how much more ought the children of God express the love of God to one another! What we believe and how we love must stay connected.

II. Overcoming the world comes as we see the relationship between the life of obedience and the life of love (2-3).

1. *There is a clear relationship between loving God and doing what He commands, on the one hand, and loving God's children, on the other hand.* Here John connects two of the

³ David Finch, Oakland, Oregon; source: Steve Hartman, "Political rivals stun voters with unexpected duet" CBS News: The Uplift (10-19-18).

evidences of authentic Christian faith: the tests of *love* and *righteousness*: the social test and the moral test. Note that he presents these as inseparable. We learn that we love God's children as we love God and do what He says is right.

2. *John says that God's commands are not overly demanding.* They are not "heavy burdens" (v. 3, NJV). Why is this? Because God Himself gives us the power to obey His commands. Paul chimes in here in harmony with John [Philippians 2:12-13, FJV]: ¹² *Therefore, my beloved, just as you^p have always obeyed, not as in my presence only but now much more in my absence, work out your^p own salvation with fear and trembling,* ¹³ *for God is the One who keeps working in you^p both to keep on desiring and to keep on working on behalf of the good pleasure (of God).*⁴ How do we "work out our salvation with fear and trembling"? By the power of God Who is at work in us all the time both to desire and to effect in our lives what brings Him the delight in those who bear His image. We are never overburdened in obedience to God because it is just in this effort to obey, including loving each other in Jesus' name, that He empowers us. He never empowers us to live selfishly. If we must do that, we are on our own.

A—God empowers His children to act in accordance with our design as His children, not contrary to it.

I—And, that design is a moral and spiritual one. Think of it like this. Suppose one of our adult children asked us to loan them \$500 (and then imagine that we had the \$500 to loan them). What do you think we might say in response? Now wait, we are not complete tightwads, so our answer would not be an automatic "No!" We would probably ask, "What do you need the money for?" Now while we are imagining this scenario, suppose he/she answered, "I want to travel to Central Asia to serve God with our friends and fellow-servants of Jesus who live there, and I am \$500 short to pay for the trip." What do you think we might say (all other things being equal)? Probably, we would say, if we had the extra money, "Yes, of course!" If we could afford to do so, we would probably just give him/her the money.

But suppose we asked the question, "What do you need the money for?" and the answer was quite different. Suppose he/she said, "I found a great deal on a small stash of cocaine and I want to throw a party for my friends." You can probably imagine (I hope!) the answer to that question. It would not be, "How lovely. Can we come, too?" It would be more like, "Of course not, and if you persist in your plan, we will probably alert the police to attend in their official capacity."

In short, as parents, we would empower our children (to the limits of our powers) to do what we know and believe to be right. As such, we would be acting a bit like God does. When we come to Him and ask Him for things that we would spend selfishly and harmfully (and He knows better than we do what will ultimately bring us harm), we should expect Him to say, "No. I love you too much to give you that." But when we ask for His Spirit to fill our lives, to enlarge the capacity of our hearts to have love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control in our lives, we know that this is exactly the kind of person He wants us to be (See Galatians 5:22-23, the "fruit of the Spirit"). He will give us everything and take away anything that will bring about this ultimate result. We overcome the world when love for God and others and obedience to God are the hallmarks of our lives.

III. Overcoming the world comes through faith in Jesus (4-5).

1. *Our relationship with God guarantees that we are victorious over the world. "Whatever has been begotten from God is victor over the world"* (v. 4, NJV). Notice again, the power for the

⁴ Here, the literal expression is "the good pleasure" and it presumably means God's good pleasure.

Christian to keep on living for what matters for eternity, even as the temporary priorities of the world press in on every side, comes from God Himself. As those “begotten from God,” the followers of Jesus draw their life from His life.

2. *That victory is found as we keep on believing in Jesus as the Son of God.* This again is evidence for the authentic followers of Jesus: the doctrinal or truth-test. We keep on believing in Jesus as the Son of God and this ties us to what matters for eternity and not just in this present time.

A—This is the central question of Christian proclamation: are we trusting in Jesus as the Son of God and as Lord of our lives?

I—I observe what some recent research claims, that we Americans are in a stage of mass cynicism. Check out this recent research.

“Edelman, a leading global communications marketing firm, publishes a yearly ‘Trust Barometer’ report. A ... report [in 2018] shows a plummet in trust across the United States. Here’s a summary of the report:

- ⇒ Trust in the US has suffered the largest-ever-recorded drop in the survey’s history among the general population. Trust among the general population fell nine points to 43 percent, placing it in the lower quarter of the 28-country Trust Index.
- ⇒ The collapse of trust in the US is driven by a staggering lack of faith in government, which fell 14 points to 33 percent.
- ⇒ The remaining institutions of business, media, and NGOs also experienced declines of 10 to 20 points.

“The United States is enduring an unprecedented crisis of trust,” said Richard Edelman, president and CEO of Edelman. “This is the first time that a massive drop in trust has not been linked to a pressing economic issue or catastrophe ... In fact, it’s the ultimate irony that it’s happening at a time of prosperity, with the stock market and employment rates in the US at record highs.”⁵

So, where is the mercury on our “trust barometer”? Are we being sucked down into doubt and cynicism by our current cultural milieu? Now more than ever we need what only Jesus Christ can provide: forgiveness of sins (which takes care of the past), the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (to enable us to live by love in the present), and the promise of God (which is the basis of our hope for the future).

IV. Overcoming the world comes as we receive the revelation of Jesus Christ (6-12).

[I must add an explanation on the text of the passage before us, as there is a bit of a difference here between the King James Version and pretty most other translations in English. In the KJV, these words are added right after “there are three who bear witness” (my translation): “in the heavens: the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit and these three are one, and there are three who bear witness on the earth ...” and then on to the rest of the text. What are we to make of this difference? I offer these comments:

⁵ Cision PR Newswire, “2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Reveals Record-Breaking Drop in Trust in the U.S.” (1-21-18), as reported in PreachingToday.com.

a. The doctrine of the Trinity is neither established nor overturned by the omission of these words in our Bibles. There is ample evidence throughout the New Testament to establish this doctrine.

b. The words omitted by more recent translations (or put into a footnote) do not appear in *any* ancient Greek manuscripts. The only manuscripts that have those words (8, out of the nearly 5,000 whole or partial manuscripts) date from the 16th century or later. All of them are dubious, as the material that is omitted seems to have been added to the texts during that time period.

c. The words are found in later editions of the Latin translation of the New Testament, though they are absent from all other translations/versions in the ancient world.

d. The presumption of conservative scholars who study these manuscripts to try to establish the best original text is that these words were written into the margin of a Latin edition of the Greek New Testament, and then over time, they made their way into the text itself. Erasmus is the classical and Biblical scholar of the 16th century who edited the Greek New Testament for the first time in centuries (100 years, give or take before King James authorized a fresh translation into English). He only had a handful of Greek manuscripts to work with, and none of them had this passage in it. According to A. T. Robertson (*Word Pictures in the New Testament, ad loc*), “Erasmus did not have it in his first edition, but rashly offered to insert it if a single Greek MS had it and one was produced with the insertion, as if made to order.”

So, with that in mind, let’s look at the remainder of the text.]

1. Three witnesses to Jesus (6-8):

a. The Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit Who “descended on [Jesus] in bodily form, like a dove” at His baptism (Luke 3:22a, ESV; cf. Matthew 4:16; Mark 1:10). This was followed by the voice that came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22b, ESV). Not only did the Spirit confirm the ministry of Jesus, He also is the One Who makes Jesus real in the hearts and lives of Jesus’ followers. This is what Jesus foretold (John 15:26, ESV): “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”

b. The Water. As far back as Tertullian (2nd-3rd century AD), this was understood as the event of Jesus’ baptism. This is where the Holy Spirit confirmed the nature and mission of Jesus. “You are my beloved Son”: hard to miss the point of such a saying.

c. The Blood. This is also understood as a reference to the death of Jesus on the cross. Even at that event, a Roman guard (a centurion, a man of authority in the Roman Army), praised God as He saw Jesus die: “Certainly this man was innocent!” (Luke 23:47, ESV). Matthew reports something even more specific and amazing, both from the centurion and from those with him, upon seeing the earthquake and other attending events: “Truly this was *the Son of God!*” (Matthew 27:54, ESV, my emphasis).

At both Jesus’ baptism and again at His death, we have compelling testimony to the nature and work of Jesus. As Peter summarized it, “Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring [us] to God ...” (1 Peter 3:18, ESV).

2. God’s witness is greater than human witness (9). Even though there were human witnesses at these confirming events, God’s witness encompasses them all.

3. The witness of faith confirms the witness of God about Jesus (10). This verse is rather clear. If we have listened to the witness of God, we have come to believe in Jesus. If we do not trust in God’s witness to Jesus, we are essentially calling God a liar. Not a good thing.

4. We all bear witness to eternal life through Jesus Christ (11-12). We bear witness to the *claim* and also to the *reality*. If we have the Son, we have the life, and if we have the life, we have the Son.

A—So, have we received the revelation of Jesus as given in the New Testament of the Bible?
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I—“On January 12, 2010, a massive and devastating earth quake struck just outside Port-au-Prince, the capital city of Haiti. Countless buildings in the city collapsed and over a hundred thousand lives were lost. The already shaky power grid was effectively destroyed, along with every other form of infrastructure. That night, with aftershocks rolling through the ground, almost all the residents of the city and the surrounding countryside stayed outside, torn with grief and fear....

“An article on NPR summarized it this way: ‘For the Western hemisphere’s poorest country, the earthquake that hit Haiti in January [2010] was an especially cruel blow. Despite this, it’s hard to find a Haitian who doesn’t profess a belief in a loving God.’

“And they sang.... When you’ve lost everything, in fact, you still have song. All over the hills of Haiti those first terrible nights, under the starlit sky, the voices of the people of Haiti rose up in grief and lament, in prayer and hope.

“They had something we have almost lost—and they still have it, as anyone who has visited a Haitian church or family knows. We can have it in our homes, and in our churches too....”⁶

Receiving the witness of God, or history, and of the heart about Jesus leads to eternal life—and a song of gratitude in our hearts, regardless of how shaken our world may have become.

Take it home (summary applications).

I. Have we placed our faith in what God has revealed through Jesus Christ?

II. Are we expressing that faith in worship and prayer?

III. Are we expressing our faith through love for God’s children?

⁶ Adapted from Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family* (Baker Books, 2017), pages. 193-194.