

## ***Love and Faith: Our Assurance***

In the Apostle John's day, already in the latter part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, false teachers had infiltrated even the churches of Asia Minor, and he issued a warning to be vigilant against these distortions and to remain faithful to the true belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. In response to false teachers, John gives three tests of eternal life—right belief in Jesus, right behavior in the world, and genuine love for fellow believers.

Follow as I read our text, **1 John 5:1-5**

*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 who conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*

Springtime is a beautiful season of the year. Yet, as you may recall of your years as a student, spring and the month of May can also be a stressful time, especially in taking final exams. But in any case, tests, or examinations, are necessary for students and teachers as a method of evaluating progress in learning. They can be a positive or negative experience and a stressful or even enjoyable experience, depending on the severity of the test and the readiness and capability of the student.

I recall times when I actually enjoyed taking a test, likely in a subject I enjoyed, which I studied beyond even what the test expected. I'm sure the apostle John would have been delighted to think everyone in the churches of Asia Minor, where this letter was circulated, passed these tests "with flying colors." But there were already those in the churches who were on a course of failure due to their distorted understanding of Jesus, their ungodly lifestyle and their failure, indeed refusal to exercise genuine love for others in the churches. What John presents is a picture of authentic, genuine faith that accompanies the rebirth and eternal life. The result I trust will be a strong assurance of our valid and even vibrant faith.

George Whitefield, the famous British evangelist during the Great Awakening of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, "was speaking to a man about his soul.

He asked the man, 'Sir, what do you believe?'

'I believe what my church believes,' the man replied respectfully

'And what does your church believe?'

'The same thing I believe.'

'And what do *both* of you believe?' the preacher inquired again.

'We both believe the same thing!' was the only reply he could get" (W Wiersbe).

In today's text, John describes for us an authentic faith that gives unmistakable assurance that we have received the gift of eternal life. How do we know we have authentic faith? What is the basis for a calm assurance in these very troubled and uncertain times?

John relates first of all the object and origin of authentic faith (1.). In this day and age there's no shortage of faith. In our post-modern culture, all "faiths" are purported to be equally valid. Only those that claim to be based on absolute truth are "off limits." Many people are seeking after their own path of enlightenment and are practicing great faith in whatever false teachings seem plausible and alluring, even belief in their own self-concocted religion or philosophy. Belief can be in almost anything, with the final results being equal. To the post-modern relativist, "all points of view on a given topic are equally valid, even though they are apparently incompatible" (McGrath).

Whether it's faith in faith or faith in falsehood, John calls for authentic faith in Jesus the Christ as the object. As he spells out in his Gospel and this letter, Jesus is the eternal Son of God, the living Word, without beginning in time, and the co-Creator of all that exists (Jn. 1:1-18). In the opening verses of this letter (1:1-4), John and others testified to his reality and were convinced of his identity as the Word of life. His sacrificial death on the cross provided for our forgiveness of sins, and he continues to be our advocate with the Father (2:1f). Jesus' incarnation and sacrificial death is the supreme revelation of the Father's heart and demonstration of his unfathomable love (4:9f).

To believe in Jesus is not just to know he lived, died and rose again and ascended back to the Father. It's to believe in him, to call upon him, to stake your life, future and eternity upon his authority to forgive your sins and to give you eternal life in his kingdom, beginning here on earth. It's to trust in Jesus and follow him as Lord and Master, the supreme authority of your life.

Believing in Jesus with authentic faith that results in a personal love relationship is not something that comes about by human initiative, as John noted in his Gospel (1:13). Authentic faith is God-given faith that demonstrates itself in a continuing love/faith relationship with Jesus. John connects faith with love. Faith that passes this final exam gives rise to definite actions. John concurs with the apostle Paul, who writes in response to debating over interpretation of the law, that "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6b). Authentic faith is necessarily connected with love for God and his children.

To fail to love is evidence there has been no regenerative faith experience. John says strongly, that to claim to love God and to hate and/or to fail to love a brother or sister in Christ is to be a liar (4:20). Our love for others is grounded in our love for God, and we are to love others in God and love God in others. As love for others demonstrates the genuineness of our love for God, so does our love for God demonstrate the genuineness of our love for others. Brotherly and sisterly love is proof of our love for God, but the reverse is also true. When we receive the love of God, we are transformed by it and become instruments of his love to others. As John says, our acts of love for others will be expressions of our love for and obedience to God.

As I wrote in my letter to announce my retirement, I'm grateful to have served these almost 10 years as pastor of a congregation of folks who truly love one another. Evangelicals like me are schooled to examine the theological rectitude of church members, and whether or not they've asserted belief in a certain "plan of salvation," usually including certain verses from Paul's letter to the Romans. But I believe your genuine love for one another and for all who enter these doors is strong evidence that you belong to Christ and have been born from above. Your faith expresses itself through love, which is caring, active involvement in meeting the needs of others.

Authentic faith operates also with loving and joyful obedience. John writes, "This is love for God: to obey his commands" (3). Loving God involves and demands obedience to his will for us, which is essentially to love him with our entire being and love our neighbor as ourselves (Mk. 12:28-34). Jesus' interpretation and application of the Moral Law, the Decalogue, summarizes the way we are to love God and others (Matt. 5:17-48). As Paul says, "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10b). Because of God's love working in our hearts, we seek to love him and others with God-like, sacrificial and caring involvement in meeting the needs of others.

The ways of God are not a legalistic and restrictive lifestyle, but rather are a life of joy and peace. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1a). God's will for us is that we enjoy life in him as we live in step with the Spirit, experiencing love from him and for him, and allowing him to love others through us as we minister to and care for others.

Some of you may be carrying the burden of trying to please your parents or spouse, who never gave you their approval. You keep trying to perform for them, sometimes even though they may be long deceased. You're trying to prove yourself worthy of their love and approval, which you are never likely to receive. This is a huge and unnecessary burden. We need to find the peace of God that assures us of his love for us and his delight in us and his desire for the very best for us. We don't have to be afraid of God's will for us because he wants the very best for us, that which is "good, pleasing and perfect" (Rom. 12:2b).

Even at my advanced age, I'm discovering the freedom that comes from knowing God's unconditional love for me, even his delight in me, despite my many failures to honor and reflect his presence. It's setting me free from fearing what others think of me or what they might do against me.

Jesus tells us that opposition to a life of faithful discipleship should not discourage us, but rather should serve to assure us of the authenticity of our faith. In fact, he says "Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you" (Lk. 6:26a), and "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (Jn. 15:18f). Paul assured Timothy and assures us that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

We can expect opposition to true godliness and obedience to Christ, and should consider it as a confirmation of authentic faith and also should be assured of the outcome of victory. As children

of God, belonging to his kingdom, we are already “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37). Because of the cross and resurrection of Christ, and because the risen Christ is interceding for us (8:31-39), we need fear nothing nor any one, not even our real enemy, “the satan” himself. Paul says there is no one whose opposition, threats or attacks can touch us apart from the permission of a sovereign, loving God (31).

Our present salvation and future, everlasting deliverance is assured because of Christ’s victorious death and resurrection. And even now, though we experience trials, opposition and the attacks of the world, the sinful flesh and the devil, we can rest in the victorious power of Christ, who will sustain us with his grace, protect us by his power, and guide and use our lives for his glory.

Paul speaks of the necessity of praying in the Spirit as essential for victorious living (Eph. 6:18). And later in this fifth chapter, John assures us of our confidence in prayer: “This is the confidence that we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him” (5:15). Likely in the context this promise is not a carte blanche guarantee that we’ll be granted our “grocery list” of things we want for ourselves or even to make life easier. Rather, it seems John encourages prayer that should be confident of all we need to live victoriously in the way of the cross.

The key to victory is living by faith in Christ, being united with him in a faith/love relationship “so that his victory becomes ours” (Bruce). Jesus announced his victory over Satan’s power, sin and death when he cried victoriously from the cross, “It is finished!” (Jn. 19:30). The victory he accomplished is transferred to us by faith. We live in the victory of the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 12:11).

By grace God has chosen us to be in his Kingdom, and we can be confident, as we live and pray, that we’re on the winning side. I recall when someone asked the late, great world-wide evangelist Billy Graham if he was an optimist or a pessimist, in light of the chaotic and dismal state of world events. “I’m an optimist,” he replied, “because I’ve read the last page of the Bible.” We know how things will turn out, when the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, “who will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). Everyone who has authentic faith shares in this present and future victory.

I pray that all of us here today will be able to take this faith and love exam and say, with joyful confidence, “I pass! By the grace of God, I pass!” Has this ever been your response, as you took a test, realizing only by God’s goodness were you able to pass? And this is the way it is with this final exam allowing the gift of eternal life and entrance into the everlasting kingdom.

The truth is, not one of us could pass this test on our own. And, praise God, we don’t have to! God’s Son was incarnated for us so we don’t have to be reincarnated! He took the exam for us—he lived a perfectly sinless life and was crucified to satisfy God’s justice against our sin. By his mercy and love, God then, when we accept and trust what Christ has done for us, will give us a passing grade. We don’t just squeak by, just above a failing grade, but he puts us at the head of

the class and on his honor roll. By grace, through child-like faith in Jesus, God puts us right with himself and credits us with the righteousness of Christ, and puts us on a path of growing in Christ-likeness until we reach perfection when we see Jesus face to face (3:2).

God's faithful love for us is unconditional. Even if you've given yourself a failing grade on your life so far, God's love for you has never failed. My favorite picture of God's love for me is the one Jesus gave of the loving Father (Lk. 15: 11-24), who simply wants us to live forever in his loving embrace, as the Father of the prodigal embraced his sin-damaged son.