

Marks of True Believers

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[0:00] For those of you that remember the last time we were in 1 John, we finished chapter 4.

! For those four chapters, John has been building up to the main purpose of the letter. We'll have one or two more lessons before we get to that main purpose, but the main purpose is 1 John 5.13. 1 John 5.13 says, These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God. So John wants two things to come from this letter.

He wants us to know that we have eternal life, and he wants us to believe in the Son of God.

Throughout the first four chapters of the letter, John repeats the same themes, but each time he adds more detail to those themes. Chapter 5 is going to be no different, and as John concludes the letter, he reemphasizes some of the same themes again. We'll skip a detailed review at the beginning of the lesson because the verses themselves will lead us into a review of what we've already covered. So we'll start chapter 5 tonight by looking at verses 1 through 5, and in these verses we'll see three marks of true believers, and these three characteristics come straight from the text. So let's go ahead and read verses 1 through 5 of chapter 5.

Verse 1.

The verses tonight have a little bit of an awkward flow to them. By the end of the lesson, we'll see why that is. But the first mark of true believers comes in verses 1, 4, and 5. So let's read just those three verses again, and as we do that, look for one particular word that's repeated. So here are 1, 4, and 5. It says, 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. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world, and this is the victory that has overcome the world, our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? I'm sure you noticed it there, but that repeated word is believes. In verse 1, John says that whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. And then in verse 5, John says that ones who believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God are the ones that overcome. And the victory that overcomes the world is our faith. So faith, then, is the first mark of the true believer. The term believes there conveys the idea of continuing faith. So it's making the point there that genuine believers are those that continue in the faith throughout their life. Saving belief is not simply intellectual acceptance, but it's wholehearted dedication to Jesus Christ that is permanent. We've touched on it already, but to be effective, it's not simply enough to just have faith. You have to have faith in the right thing.

[3:48] And we must have faith in something very specific. We have to believe that Jesus is the Christ and that he is born of God. So the object of the believer's faith is Jesus, particularly that he's the promised Messiah or the anointed one whom God sent to be the Savior from sin. Whoever places faith in Jesus Christ as the only Savior, then, has been born again, and as a result, he becomes an overcomer. The word born there is the same word that Jesus used in John's gospel when he spoke to Nicodemus. And listen to John 3, 7. Jesus said in John 3, 7, do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. And John says the same thing here then in 1 John. The only difference is that he phrases it that you need to be born of God. And the tense of the Greek verb there indicates that ongoing faith is the result of the new birth, and therefore it's also the evidence of the new birth. So the sons of God will manifest the reality that they have been born again by continuing to believe in God's Son, and that new birth brings us into permanent faith relationship with God and with Christ. Because belief that Jesus is the Christ is evidence that someone is born of

God, we need to remind ourselves then of what it means to believe that Jesus is the Christ. And this requirement includes believing specifically that Jesus has come in the flesh, that he is God's Son, and that he is the Savior of the world. John has already listed those requirements elsewhere in 1

John.

In 1 John 1, 3, John said, that which we have seen and heard, we declare to you that you also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. Then in 4, 2, and 3, we have the verses where John emphasizes the necessity of believing that Jesus came in the flesh. And 4, 2, and 3 say this, By this you know the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. Then we saw it again in chapter 4, in 1 John 4, 14 and 15. That's where John talked about the necessity of believing that Jesus is the Savior of the world. And here's what 1 John 4, 14 and 15 say, And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So you can see each time that John introduces the theme, he adds something to it. And back in 1 John 5, 1, John's promoting more than just intellectual assent as the requirement for being a child of God. The second half of the verse indicates that true faith also includes an ethical dimension. And that ethical dimension is that faith and love are inseparable. Look at the last phrase of verse 1 again. It says,

And everyone who loves him who begot also loves him who is begotten of him. The pronouns there make that phrase a little tough to read. And so what John is saying is, Everyone who loves God who begot also loves the Son who is begotten of God.

[7:35] So once again, everyone who loves God who begot also loves the Son who is begotten of God. And that's why we can say that faith and love are inseparable.

One commentator put it this way. He said, Here, John is not trying to show how a person experiences the new birth. His aim, rather, is to indicate the evidence which shows that a person stands in the continuing relationship of a child of God to the Father.

That evidence is that he holds true to the true faith about Jesus. And in that verse, the perfect tense of the verb once again suggests a past action which results in things continuing on into the present. So in other words, we were regenerated in the past, but we must constantly live out the faith in the present. And that faith is that Jesus is the Messiah. And we must also give our love to him by showing obedience to his command.

So John's stating then that a believer must love his heavenly Father and the other offspring of his heavenly Father. Of course, that's Jesus. But also our brothers and sisters in Christ.

[8:51] And we'll come back to that thought in a little bit. But for now, look at verses 4 and 5 again, because they really go with verse 1. Verses 4 and 5 show the results of proper faith, that true faith overcomes the world.

Those verses say, for whatever is born of God overcomes the world, and this is the victory that has overcome the world, our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Before we dig into those verses, let's remind ourselves of what John means in this letter whenever he talks about the world. He's not talking about a reference to the physical, material world here. He's talking about the invisible spiritual system of evil that's dominated by Satan, and all of this evil offers in opposition to God, his word, and his people.

So here's what John said about the world in 1 John 2, 15-17. He said, When we head back to tonight's text, Notice how the verses in 1 John 5, 1 and 1 John 5, 4 tie together.

[10:32] Verse 1 says that whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. And verse 4 says that whatever is born of God overcomes the world.

So that's obviously good news for true believers. And in verses 4 and 5, John repeats the reference to overcoming the world three times.

And of course he does that to really press home the idea. And the word for overcomer comes from a Greek word meaning to conquer, to have victory, to have superiority, or to have conquering power.

The word reflects a genuine superiority that leads to overwhelming success. So the victory is going to be demonstrable. It's going to be overthrowing an enemy so that the victory is seen by everyone. And Jesus also used this word to describe himself. Listen to what Jesus said in John 16, 33. He said, These things I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace.

[11:40] In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world. We know that the prosperity gospel or the health and wealth advocates like to take 1 John 4 and 5 out of context.

When John talks about overcoming the world, does he really mean, though, that Christians are going to have a life on this earth that's filled with sunshine and rainbows all the time? Jesus' words in John 16, 33 clearly show the answer to that question.

Jesus said, In this world we will have tribulation, but we need to remember that he has overcome the world. Do the words about tribulation ring true to you?

Has that been common of what you have experienced in your life as a Christian? There's a certain credibility to it, isn't it, when you think about it? So because of that, we'd better dig deeper into 1 John 5, 4 and 5 to learn what's meant by overcoming the world.

The particular nature of the victory is understood in different ways by people. It could refer to Christ's once and for all victory on the cross over Satan's sin in the world.

[12:57] It could refer to the believer's victory over the heretics in this world. Or it could also refer to the victory that occurs at the conversion of the individual believer.

I think the best way to look at it is that it probably includes all three of these things. The ground of our victory is Christ's death and resurrection. And from that work, believers will have victory over everything that is in opposition to God.

And then daily victory is also granted to the individual believer. But he must exercise faith in Christ and be active in his pursuit of God to see that victory. Just in case we need a reminder of which people overcome the world, look at verse 5 again.

It says, Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? In verse 1, the content of true faith affirmed that Jesus is the Christ.

And here, true faith affirms that Jesus is the Son of God. Which that suggests John considered these two things as virtual synonyms. That confession was aimed at countering the heretical tendencies of the false teachers that abused the idea that Jesus was the Son of God.

[14:18] Some of those false teachers denied that Jesus was the Son of God, while others denied that he'd come in the flesh. John is saying that saving faith must have as its foundation the idea of both that Jesus is the Son of God, and that he did come in the flesh, and he spent his entire career as the Son, and he continues as the Son, just as he always has been.

So this article of faith underlies all the other parts of the Christian message. If you destroy this truth, you destroy the whole gospel, and you nullify God's provision for victory over sin in the world.

On the other hand, if we stay true to the apostolic message, we assure ourselves of victory. And that's why true believers should take heart.

John has already encouraged his readers in their dealing with false teachers. Remember when he said in 1 John 4, verses 4 through 6. 1 John 4, verses 4 through 6 are where he wrote, You are of God, little children, and have overcome them.

There's that word again. And then he said, Because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world, therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.

[15:38] We are of God. He who knows God hears us. He who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the Spirit of truth, and the Spirit of error.

So 1 John 4, 4 sounds a lot like our passage tonight. Listen to just 4, 4 again. You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. So we can summarize verses 1, 4, and 5 of chapter 5 like this. Faith in Jesus Christ and dedication of our lives to him make us overcomers.

So we've looked at the first mark of true believers. The second mark of true believers is love. We saw that at the end of verse 1.

John emphasizes that point even more in verse 2. We're going to read the two verses again, but we'll back up to the middle of verse 1. And to keep the pronouns from confusing us, I'm going to read the end of verse 1 with the paraphrase that we discussed earlier.

[16:50] So starting with the end of verse 1, Everyone who loves God, who begot, also loves the Son, who is begotten of God. By this we know that we love the children of God when we love God and keep His commandments.

The overcomer then believes in God and loves both God and fellow believers. John's arguing once more that love for others is grounded in the love for God.

Let's look back at a few cases in this letter where John also made that same argument. In 4.8, John said, He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Then in 4.16, he said, And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in Him.

And then just a few verses down in 4.19, we see, We love Him because He first loved us. Love for God and love for others, love for others, then, are interrelated.

[18:04] Each feeds and strengthens the other, though love for God is the basis for any and every other manifestation of true Christian love. Each kind of love, whether it's for God or for others, demonstrates the genuineness of the other and reinforces it.

Brotherly love is the proof of the love for God, but the reverse is also true. Just like it's impossible to love God without loving God's children, it's impossible to love God's children, truly, without loving God.

John said it like this in 1 John 4.21. He said, This is the commandment we have from Him, that he who loves God must love his brother also.

The end of 1 John 5.2 touches on the third mark of true believers. So we've seen faith and love as the first two marks.

The third mark of true believers is obedience. And verse 3 brings out that characteristic even more. Verse 2 said, By this we know that we love the children of God when we love God and keep His commandments.

[19:18] And in verse 3, we see, For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. So you see that the common phrase in those two verses is, Keep His commandments.

John's been building his argument all throughout this passage. We know that we're born of God if we love God, love God's Son, and love other believers. We also know we love God when we keep His commandments.

If you're thinking that we've heard the theme of obedience before, you're right again on that one. But that's why it also is listed here as the third mark of true believers. Love for God is real only when God's commands are kept.

And we'll look at a few places in the letter where John also emphasized the importance of obedience. The first one is chapter 2, verses 3 through 6.

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, I know Him, and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

[20:31] But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says He abides in Him ought Himself also to walk just as He walked.

Listen to 1 John 5, 2, and 3 one more time to hear how similar the two sections are. 5, 2, and 3 say, By this we know that we love the children of God when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. John loves to use the phrase keep His commandments.

In chapter 2, he said we know Him if we keep His commandments. Here in chapter 5, John says we know that we are children of God when we keep His commandments. So he's saying the same thing a little bit different way.

John likely has in mind what he heard Jesus say. Listen to Jesus' own words in John's Gospel.

Here's John 14, 15. That's the Gospel of John, chapter 14, verse 15.

[21:43] Jesus said, If you love me, keep my commandments. Then later on in John's Gospel, Jesus said these words in 15, 10, and 11.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you that my joy may remain in you and that your joy may be full.

The requirement of obedience runs throughout the Bible. We see the requirement first in the Garden of Eden. Then moving along in the Old Testament, the history of Israel provides unmistakable evidence that communion and fellowship with God require obedience to His commands.

For proof of that, listen to Deuteronomy 10, 12, and 13. This is Moses talking here in Deuteronomy 10, 12, and 13. He says, And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes, which I command you today for your good.

The Israelites had a spiritual relationship with the Lord that was established through His election of the nation and the promise that He made to Abraham. But their failure to live out the commands of God outlined in Deuteronomy led to their ejection from the land and exile in Babylon.

[23 : 24] We need to remember that obedience to God does not bring about justification.

Justification comes through faith alone. But obedience as the pattern of life does give evidence that we've been born again.

To know God involves a personal relationship that transforms our behavior. Getting back to 1 John again, we've already looked at how similar 1 John 5, 2, and 3 are to what John wrote in chapter 2. Listen to 5, 3 again. As John usually does when he revisits the same theme, he adds another dimension to that theme. 1 John 5, 3 says, For this is the love of God that we keep His commandments and His commandments are not burdensome.

Do you see the new part there? The final sentence is the new part. That's where he said, And His commandments are not burdensome.

God's love in His people gives them the desire to love and please God. So then with eagerness, God's people keep His commandments. Rightly understood and followed, God's commandments bring believers great joy and freedom rather than a sense of oppression.

[24 : 46] Of course, this doesn't mean that God's laws are not exacting or demanding. Instead, it means that God's laws are not a terrible weight that we can't bear. God's moral standards are high, but God gives the Christian the grace to be able to live up to those standards.

Love-prompted obedience is not a crushing burden that exhausts a believer's strength and destroys a sense of freedom in Christ. In Matthew, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees because they tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders.

By contrast, Jesus does not weigh His people down with meaningless laws that do not affect the heart. Instead, He gives commands that reveal to us the heart of God and direct our hearts to God. So when was the last time you thought about obedience that way? Listen to that part again. Jesus does not weigh down His people with meaningless laws that do not affect the heart.

Instead, He gives commands that reveal to us the heart of God and direct our hearts to God. So the purpose of obedience then is to direct our hearts to God.

[25 : 59] Many of you likely have already made the connection to something that Jesus Himself said. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 11 verses 28 through 30. Jesus said, Come to Me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

Think about that last sentence again, which is verse 30. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. Where do you think John got the idea that Jesus' commands are not burdensome?

I think it's pretty likely he's remembering that time or maybe many of the other times that Jesus said the same thing. And Jesus equates the Christian life with spiritual rest.

In describing the provision of this rest, Jesus borrows the imagery of plowing the fields. like the yoke that couples oxen together, discipleship does not exempt us from work, but it makes that work manageable.

[27 : 14] Back in John's day, Jews commonly spoke of taking on the yoke of the Torah to refer to the acceptance of the obligations and stipulations of the law, that Jesus calls people not to the law, but to himself.

So that's a key difference there. Jesus calls people not to the law, but to himself. We know that Jesus did not escape the hard life, but he still experienced rest and refreshment in the midst of the hard life.

Christians are never promised freedom from illness or calamity, but they may experience God's sustaining grace so that they are not crushed or driven to despair. The rest that Jesus offers his disciples enables us to overcome certain measures of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty.

Instead, we find meaningfulness in the joy and peace of God's presence and that very presence of Jesus Christ. By contrast, most Jews found the interpretation that the law posed upon them was increasingly burdensome as they tried to live up to what their leaders added to the requirements.

Sometimes, when we look at a passage, we might hear Pastor Don refer to the chiasmic structure of the passage. A chiasm, or also called a chiasmus, is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order.

[28:42] So you have a mirror effect then as the things get repeated back and each idea is connected to its reflection by a repeated word and the word chiasm comes from the Greek letter chi, which looks like our letter X.

And there's a coherence there in 1 John 5, 1 through 5 that actually has the chiastic structure to it. You probably noticed that by how we group them today.

The one who believes that Jesus is the Christ corresponds to the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. The one born of God corresponds to everyone born of God.

And the one who loves those born of the Father obviously loves the children of God. John Stott put it this way. He said, Christian believers are God's children born from above.

God's children are loved by all who love God. Those who love God also keep his commands. They keep his commands because they overcome the world and they overcome the world because they are Christian believers born from above.

[29:51] that's why John could write, for this is the love of God that we keep his commandments and his commandments are not burdensome for whatever is born of God overcomes the world and this is the victory that has overcome the world our faith.

Who is he who overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? Thank you.