

I John 5:1-12, God's Testimony

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Introduction

We conclude First John with a passage that is a great fit for today, in that the Church Calendar celebrates the ascension of Jesus on this Sunday, and our culture celebrates Mother's Day. This text speaks of being begotten of God, bringing us into a kind of relationship that is best described in terms of parent and child. It also speaks of the testimony that God has shared with the world, through commandments, through the Spirit of power, and through the eternal life of the Son, all of which fit the vision of Jesus Christ enthroned as the right hand of God's power.

Many supposed they could call themselves God's Children but ignore God's commands, or ignore large pieces of the truth about Jesus Christ. John sets the truth in absolutes, to end the confusion and give the Children of God a clear basis for discernment, stating in verse 12, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." **Let us pray.**

Father in heaven, may your Spirit awaken us to love and trust as children, that we may reflect the life and mind of your own Son, Jesus Christ, and share him with our world. Amen.

1. Commands

In a relationship of command some people are in charge and tell others what to do. Rome was a slave society where most people had to serve at the whim of a few with no hope of benefit to themselves. Commands are burdens to a slave. But there are relationships where the lines of command are just as clear, but the interest is mutual. Parents and children are in a command relationship. So are coaches and their athletes. When these relationships function well, commands are not burdens. Commands might be tough: Doing ten push-ups every time you drop

a pass, and doing laps after practice, are tough for the athlete, but the athlete trusts the coach and wants the same goals as the coach – winning, through superior condition and superior skills.

Athletes who do not want those goals anymore can quit.

First John mostly uses the family as a model for the relationship of God with believers. Commands in the home might be tough. A curfew might be enforced with the discipline of “grounding” the kid. But in a home filled with love and trust, the child is anchored in the security that Mom is doing what she thinks is best out of love and concern. Studies keep confirming that children who are raised with few or no boundaries are insecure as to whether they are truly loved. Yet worldly people who know their psychology on the one hand, on the other turn and blame God for setting boundaries. *Maybe these rules did not come from God. Maybe a God of love does not have any rules. How dare preachers share a gospel of a God who makes rules and, even worse, enforces them. That amounts to slavery and bigotry and everything else that is bad.*

In First John the author is clear that the relationship of God to humankind is a command relationship, but it is not at all like slavery. Discipleship is much more like the dynamic between the coach and the athlete, while the intimacy goes as deep as that between parents and children. There is no burden to obeying God’s commands because we trust God to love us truly, to be wiser than we about what strengthens our faith, and to have in mind our most important goal – eternal life. It is true that God’s commands, which are neither hard nor burdensome, can be tough. God sets boundaries we do not want which chafe our selfish souls at the place of our deepest longings and ambitions and pride. Just like Mom, sometimes God can annoy us.

We seem to learn quickly enough about the importance of coaches and parents. Children from stable homes, after about 12 years of self-absorbed insanity – some are crazier than others - - at around the age of 25 come to appreciate the wisdom of their parents. The worldly thinking

about God, though, keeps pushing against the boundaries and rebelling against the commands, and calls into question that any rules have come from God in the first place. John writes that this cannot be true of the Child of God, for in the Child of God the Spirit awakens trust, love, and faith in God's goals and promises for our lives. These goals and promises are revealed in scripture along with rules. God's commands might be tough for the Child of God, but these commands are not burdensome, for we are not slaves. We are disciples in training; we are children being raised by God through God's Spirit as joint-heirs with Jesus Christ.

2. Spirit, Water, Blood

In verse 5 John states that the one who overcomes the world in all its wrong-headed thinking about God, is the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. This is faith that Jesus is divine. Now John will speak of his humanity in verse 6, "**He is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood.**"

Most scholars see this pointing to both the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, and his suffering and death on the cross. Jesus identified with sinful humanity not only by undergoing a baptism of repentance, which John the Baptist knew was not necessary, but also by undergoing the penalty for sin, death itself, though Jesus was innocent of any sin. His death showed the world his complete humanity, just as his resurrection and glory show his complete divinity, very God from very God.

That Jesus comes to us still in both water and blood, and not water only, reminds us that baptism does not complete the story of a disciple's faith. Baptism is confirmed in the ongoing life of faith, which is a life of growth in discipleship. Part of the ongoing life of faith is regular participation in the bread and the cup of communion. The cup is shared among the faithful as the New Covenant sealed in Christ's blood, which was shed for our purification from sins. Jesus

Christ is present in all in whom faith completes the sacraments of the water and the blood. The water of Baptism does come first, and faith must be present for communion to be received, not because these rules are burdensome, but because these sacraments serve to deepen our confidence in God's Word of faith and promise.

John goes on to write, "**And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: The Spirit, the Water, and the Blood, and the three are in agreement.**" Then in verse 10, "**Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in their heart.**"

In Jesus Christ the Divine Nature is entwined into the human nature as a unity that was present at his conception and birth, at Baptism, on the Cross, in his resurrection, now on the throne of heaven, and at every baptistery and communion table. As we participate in the life of the Church, the Children of God have this testimony of the Spirit of Jesus fully God and fully human, in whom is eternal life and power to overcome the world, and the power to love our fellow believers as brothers and sisters, all of us begotten alike in the Spirit of God. This applies to the language of being born again from the Gospel of John chapter 3. To be begotten of God, to be God's child, is to believe these things of God and of Jesus Christ, to trust them, and to obey them.

3. Life in the Son

So we come to verses eleven and twelve, which gives the bedrock testimony that God brings to the world: **And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. The one who has the Son has life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life.** Some recent authors do not care for the tone of John's letters; the absolutes, the either/or. But some do affirm that when we ignore this feature of John's writing or spin it away

as a first century wrinkle, we do so at peril to our souls and to the theological witness of the Church. It is true that this text will be unpopular with Oprah Winfrey and many of today's leading politicians: **The one who has the Son has life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life.**

Despite the world's protests, this could not be more plainly stated. In fact the New Testament Greek of First John is among the easiest in all the Bible to read and understand; it is used in first year Greek language study. There is no argument that this is what the Bible says in First John 5. Some try to refute it by attacking the Bible's relevance, whether this is a true Word from God or a word reflecting the prejudices of the author. Yet the author is describing not that these things are a voice in his head, some new revelation about Jesus only given to him and now he has to tell the world: No, John writes that these things are the testimony of the Spirit to lots of people, not to the writer alone, for these are things on which the Children of God agree.

John is describing the faith of the Church as it had already been understood by an entire community which included the writer, and the recipients of the letters, and others beside. Jesus made a statement recorded in the Gospel of John 14 verse 6, "**I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.**" Compare that to this epistle: **The one who has the Son has life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life.** The epistle is not offering something new or obscure. Jesus himself spoke about salvation and life with God in absolute terms.

When the Bible is understood as divine revelation, as God's testimony to Himself, no foundation remains for the view that other religions show the way to God. If by faith you have received his Spirit and so share in the life of the Son, you can be assured of your salvation. The more you walk with God, obeying his commands and loving your fellow believers, the greater

your sense of peace with God will be. But without the Spirit of the Son dwelling within you, you have no life with God, now or ever. It is either one or the other. John wrote this way, and Jesus spoke this way, to demand a choice from the people who call themselves Children of God, that they begin to live like it.

Conclusion

But to that question “how can I be sure that I have God’s Spirit in me? How can I be sure that I have the Son, and will share in his eternal life?” First John keeps returning to the same answer in this letter; we have read it over and over starting in chapter 2: You will know you have the love of God in you, because you will love the fellow believers as though they were family. First John states the converse just as clearly: If you do not love your fellow believers, you are not living the life of God, and your claims of being in the Son are false.

There is an adage that you can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family. That is also true of the family of God. It is not up to you to choose which people will be begotten of God, that is, born again. You are commanded to love them. But that command is not burdensome. As the Spirit dwells in you and testifies to the life of the Son in you, loving those in the church will begin to happen because God’s power will make that happen in you. So if that is not happening, and you find yourself regularly resenting and avoiding fellow believers because of their politics, or the way they dress, or their taste in music, or their manners, or because of grudges you hold over real or imagined insults, then you need to ask yourself what part you have in the life of the Son. It does not work to you hate your fellow believer but claim to be saved; that testimony falls apart.

The child of God who truly believes that eternal life is found in the Son of God, has a heart of love. The Son of God testified to love when he, Jesus Christ, came by water and by

blood, identifying completely with our humanity in our frailty and mortality. He is tangibly present for the children of God when baptism and communion are completed by faith. He is tangibly present when love is shown between believers. He is tangibly present in the love that spills over from the church and reaches out to the world. He is tangibly present in the life that is joined to his, for now and forever. Amen.