

Sermon for April 12, 2015 – Easter 2

1 John 5:1-6 (NIV84)

Theme: Children of God . . .

- 1) *Believe in Jesus as their Christ*
- 2) *Love God and their Neighbor*
- 3) *Are Victorious through Faith.*

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ² This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. ³ This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴ for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ⁵ Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. ⁶ This is the one who came by water and blood--Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

This past week I was visited by two women whom, if I had asked, would most certainly have claimed to be children of God. They were kind, respectful and passionate for what they believed. They had a thorough knowledge of the Bible and lived their faith – trying to obey God’s law as best they could. But here’s the problem: they did not believe Jesus is true God. They did not believe He died to ransom all people. They did not believe He physically rose from the dead with a glorified human body.

Contrast these two women with another type of person I have met: someone who, if you asked him, would tell you exactly who Jesus is: our Savior from sin – true God and true man. His verbal confession of Christ and God’s grace would be spot on with Scripture. He too, would claim to be a child of God. But here’s the problem: this man is also so proud of his basic understanding of grace that he doesn’t want to be bothered with studying the Bible any more. He would even go so far as to use his “being saved by grace and not by works” as an excuse for crude, selfish and sinful behavior.

Well, which one of these two groups actually represent God’s true children? Do both of them? Do neither of them? What about you? Are you a child of God? How can you be sure? What does it mean if you are? These are questions our sermon text will answer for us this morning, under the theme: **Children of God . . .**
. 1) believe in Jesus as their Christ, 2) love God and their neighbor, and 3) are victorious through faith.

Part One: Believe in Jesus as their Christ

Our sermon text is part of a letter written in response to a heresy that threatened the early Christian Church called Gnosticism. Now, even though it would be unfair to compare Gnosticism with the faith of modern day Jehovah Witnesses, they do share a common trait: they both speak highly of Christ and yet deny both His divinity and humanity.

Some of you might be thinking, “I know that Jehovah witnesses do not believe Jesus is true God, but they do not deny Christ’s humanity as well, do they?” I thought the same thing until I ask the two ladies who visited me last week if they believe Jesus’ human body rose from the dead. They told me it didn’t – that Jesus no longer has a human body!

In Apostolic times, Gnostics went around telling people that they alone are the real children of God who have the truth. So many religions (Jews, Muslims, Mormon's, Jehovah Witnesses, etc. . .) claim the same thing today. But do they have the truth? Do we? Who is really a child of God?

Our sermon text says: *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.* Now understand this correctly: to believe Jesus is the "Christ" is more than just saying the words. It means believing everything the Bible says about our Redeemer and our need for salvation.

To believe that Jesus is your Christ is, first of all, to confess that you need for a Savior: that you are so totally sinful and corrupt that you cannot even begin to earn God's favor on your own. Without this acknowledgement of sin, you can't even begin to have a proper understanding of Jesus as the Christ. Believe or not, this basic understanding of the human condition is lacking in all non-Christian religions – including the Jehovah witnesses!

But with this acknowledgement flows the second part of saving faith, that Jesus is exactly who the Bible said the Christ would be: the only begotten Son of God, who, being both true God and true man, would be able to win the righteousness you need to stand before God, and pay for your sins in full.

And this is exactly who Jesus is, as the last verse of our text says: *This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood.* In other words, Jesus was anointed at His baptism to be our Savior who, through the blood He shed on the cross, would make atonement for the sins of the whole world. He lived the perfect life we all failed to live so as to win the righteousness we need to stand before God. He suffered and died so as to pay for the sins of all mankind, in order that: *whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*ⁱ

This is what it means to believe Jesus is the Christ: it is to acknowledge Him as our divine Savior from sin! This knowledge is not something we could figure out on our own. No, it has to be revealed to us by God himself - working through the Gospel - as the Bible says: *no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.*ⁱⁱ

Becoming a child of God, therefore, does not depend on man's decision, effort or will, but completely on God's grace. Believers are born into faith by the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel, as the last verse of our text indicates: *And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.* In other words, the Holy Spirit leads us to recognize our sins and repent; the Holy Spirit leads us to know exactly who Jesus is and what He has done for our salvation; the Holy Spirit awakens faith in our hearts so that we can believe and accept all the Bible says about Christ and our salvation – no matter how illogical it may seem.

Children of God are not those who choose, labor and work for God's love – all the while denying who Christ is and their need for a Savior. Children of God are born: born of the Father's saving love, the Son's atoning sacrifice and the Holy Spirit's gracious call. Their salvation is all God's work – not their own, as the Scriptures say: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*ⁱⁱⁱ

And this last verse I just read leads to the next point John wants to make about God's children: not only do they believe in Jesus as their Christ, but they live this faith. How? By showing love to God and their neighbor.

Part Two: Love God and their Neighbor

Our sermon text states: *Everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.* Think about what this means: If you claim to love God, you cannot hate his child – regardless of whether that person be Christ himself, or a fellow Christian. Christ’s love compels us to love all people – especially our Christian neighbors, as Jesus himself once said: *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."*³⁵ *By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*^{iv}

But what does it mean to love? Does it involve avoiding people with whom you're upset or lashing out against them in anger? Is love ignoring another person's feelings or needs? No. To love is to care for others as Christ cared for you. To love is to forgive others as Christ forgave you. To love is to bear with each others' annoyances, just as Christ has done for you.

You know, brothers and sisters in Christ, here is one area in which we constantly need to grow. The devil loves sowing seeds of discord. He loves it when we hold grudges against one another – unwilling to forgive as Christ forgave us. Why? Because such attitudes derail our faith and separate us from Christ.

This fact should lead us to pray: "Lord, forgive me for all the times when I act like a selfish brat instead of a loving brother or sister. Forgive me for being so determined to insist on my rights to such a degree that I forget the unselfish, self-sacrificing love you showed me. Forgive me, Lord, and help me care for others as you have cared for me."

God loves it when we make such a confession to Him. For Christ's sake He forgives our sin and, in the peace of forgiveness, gives us direction as to how we can express love towards both Him and our neighbor. Our sermon text states: ² *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments.* ³ *For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.*

Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it for us. Why? So that we could ignore God's commandments and live however we please? No, Jesus fulfilled God's Law so that we could stand forgiven and righteous in God's sight. He fulfilled the Law so that we, with the Spirit's aid, might live a new life of love towards God and our neighbor.

And there is no greater way to show love than by keeping the Ten Commandments – not only avoiding what they forbid, but by also doing the good things they ask of us, for example: helping our neighbor in every bodily need, taking his words and actions in the kindest possible way, speaking well of him at all times, helping him protect his property, etc. . .

Now, it must be understood that these acts of love do not make us God's children; rather they show that we already are His heirs: children who are victorious through faith, to whom Jesus will say on the Last Day: *'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'* ³⁵ *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,* ³⁶ *I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*ⁿ

Part Three: Are Victorious through Faith.

Why will Jesus make such an assessment of us on the last Day? Do our deeds save us? No, but our faith in Christ does, as St. John writes: *for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.* ⁵ *Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*

Notice, John is very careful in what he says. He does not say that our works of love or keeping of the commandments win us victory over sin, death and the devil, but that we have this victory through faith: a faith that will exhibit itself by living to God's glory. But how, exactly, does our faith give us victory over sin, death and the devil? By connecting us to Jesus, our Savior, who, from the time of His baptism until the shedding of His blood, overcame the world for us by living a perfect life of love. By means of His suffering and death He paid for all our sins in full. His resurrection declares us completely forgiven. Jesus imputes all these victories to us through faith. In other words, through faith: His death is our death; His resurrection is our resurrection; His righteousness is our righteousness.

Last week we celebrated Easter. What does it mean for us that Jesus' rose from the dead? It means that the guilt of our sins no longer stands against us because all has been forgiven! It means that the devil no longer has power over us. Heaven's door is open so that all of God's children may have eternal life.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Are you a child of God? You are if your faith is in Jesus alone for salvation. Rejoice in God's Easter grace. Show your faith by living a life of love – all to the glory of His saving name. Why? Because, through faith in Christ, you already stand victorious. Amen.

ⁱ John 3:16 NIV84

ⁱⁱ 1Co 12:3 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Eph 2:8-10 NIV84

^{iv} Joh 13:34-35 NIV84

^v Mat 25:34-36 NIV84