

WE SHALL OVERCOME

by Ray C. Stedman

After many months of our study together in the First Epistle of John, we are drawing toward the close of this brief letter. In this section we come to the last theme which John discusses. I have oftentimes pointed out that the chapter divisions in the King James Version (and subsequently all other versions) are quite often very poorly placed. Many times I have indicated that a chapter division ought to be ignored; that it does not represent a break in thought. But it occurred to me that perhaps it would be good to recognize a chapter division that belongs in its place. This is true of the fifth chapter. Here is a proper break in thought. Lest I seem to be against all chapter divisions, I want to make that point clear!

In this last chapter the apostle is discussing the fifth of the series of themes that he has taken up in this epistle. There was a time when I considered the Epistle of John to be almost impossible to outline, until I saw that John is discussing various themes which very intimately tie together. Then, to my amazement, I found that John is one of the most logical and orderly of the writers of Scripture and that this letter is a beautifully-orderly presentation, when once the key to it is discovered. John has brought before us,

First, the theme of fellowship of Christ, maintaining fellowship; then maintaining truth, maintaining righteousness, maintaining love, and, now, he concludes with the theme of maintaining assurance, or confidence. The relationship between these five themes is very important. It is instructive to note that the first of these links with the last, i.e., fellowship with Christ ends in assurance or confidence. You will note that confidence is the kind of life that all men today are looking for. Which of us does not desire to be an adequate person, confident, self-assured, poised; able to cope with life? This is the image of humanity that is idealistically present in every human heart -- we each want to be this kind of person, and this is exactly what Christianity is designed to produce!

To me, the glory of our Christian faith is never that it is religious, but that it is so gloriously secular. It is designed to produce life, to fit us for living, and thus to be the kind of person that God intended man to be when he made him in the beginning -- confident, able, adequate. Now the secret of that confidence is fellowship, thus joining these two themes together -- the first and last. Fellowship is the sharing of the life of Jesus Christ. We shall see more of that as we go on in this passage. But this also explains the three intermediate themes that John discusses. This confident life will be manifest in a three-fold way: as truth, as righteousness, and as love. And there you have the exceedingly orderly division of the First Epistle of John.

These three form the test of authentic Christianity: truth, righteousness, and love. John says three specific times in this letter that, if you claim to know God, but yet walk in the darkness of disobedience, you are a liar. He does not hesitate to use this extremely direct term. You are a liar, he says. If you claim to know God and yet you walk in disobedience, you lie and do not tell the truth. There is an absence of righteousness in the life, and this puts the lie to all your claims to be a Christian. In another place, Chapter 2, he says that to claim to possess the Father and yet deny the deity and incarnation of the Son is also to be a liar. There is an absence of truth in the life, and therefore it is not genuinely Christian. There cannot be a genuine Christian life and yet a denial of the deity and incarnation of the Son.

Thirdly, to claim to love God while you ignore or mistreat your brethren, is to lie. You are a liar if you say you love God and yet you do not love your brethren, Chapter 4, Verse 20. This is the absence of love. The presence of habitual sin, of a denial of Christ, doctrinally, and of selfish hatred despite a

professed Christian experience, will expose all claims to Christianity as phony. These three must all be present. This is the whole argument of the Epistle of John. They must all be present and in ever-increasing degree. Truth, love, and righteousness; these are the marks of authentic Christianity.

Now, in this last section which deals with assurance, the apostle brings all three of these together. In the passage we take now we shall find these intertwined together; one coherent fabric of life from God, which produces assurance and confidence and victory, and is manifest as righteousness, truth and love. That is Christianity. Anything less is phony. Let us read the passage:

Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God, and every one who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? {1 Jn 5:1-5 RSV}

Notice, in Verse 1, that truth and love, John says, belong together. One produces the other. "Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God," or, literally, "Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten of God, and every one who loves the Father loves the child." Thus, he ties together these two great themes, belief in the truth, and love, and one is the result of the other. In Verse 21 of Chapter 4, he has just been talking about loving our brother. This is a command from God, he says. "He who loves God shall love his brother also." Now he answers a question that is continually being asked, though not always expressed vocally. "What does it mean to love my brother?" "Who is my brother, anyway?" The answer is in Chapter 5, Verse 1: "Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten of God." There is your brother. Such a one is part of the family. Thus, if you love the Father, you will love the other children of the Father anywhere you meet them. This is inevitable. If you, yourself, really share the life of the family of God, you will love the other members of the family.

What a condemnation this is of all denominational and sectarian spirit. I am afraid that oftentimes Christians feel they are responsible to love only those who belong to their particular group, whatever it may be. If we are Presbyterians, we love Presbyterians, but we do not like the Episcopalians or Methodists. All too frequently we run into this attitude. If I am Baptist, then I love all those who believe in immersion (all other Baptists) and that is quite an extensive group. Sometimes it is even more limited than that, and we may say, "I love only those who belong to my particular brand of Baptist churches." Or we may love only those who belong to the National Association of Evangelicals, and anyone who belongs to the National Council of Churches is automatically excluded.

But all this is a denial of what John is saying here. We are to love the members of the family, wherever they are. Our brother is he who shares the life of Jesus Christ, who is born of God, who believes that Jesus is the Christ. Now, of course, this is more than a mere credal belief. As we are gathering here, there are thousands of other churches across this land, and around the world, where men and woman are standing up and confessing Christ in the Apostolic Creed. They stand together and recite:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; etc."

Is everyone who says that a Christian? The answer is, of course not. John is not talking about a mere credal confession. John's idea here is, every one who believes that Jesus is Lord (for the Lord, Christ, is the word for Messiah, the Lord, the divine Person who was to come into human history). Every one who believes that Jesus is his Lord, his supreme concern and authority in life, the One around whom his life is built), then that one is in the family. It does not make any difference whether he differs with you about the pre-tribulation rapture, or the method of baptism, or whatever else it may be, if he has the life of the

Father and believes that Jesus is Lord, then he is a brother.

Now perhaps you ask, "Do you mean that Christians are to love only other Christians and no one else?" No, but that is where it is to begin. Love always begins within a family circle, does it not? We first love the members of our own family before we find it possible to love those outside. If love begins there, it will reach out finally to encompass the world as well. The love of a Christian is never limited merely to other "brothers," those who share the life of the Lord Jesus, but it must at least begin there. Now, Verses 2 and 3 link together love and righteousness. Here are these three tests: truth, love, and righteousness, appearing again, and in the center is love.

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.
{1 Jn 5:2-3 RSV}

Here another sticky question that is often raised is answered for us. Someone says, "How can I know that I truly love my brother? Sometimes there are differences of opinion between us, sometimes we do not agree. There are times when I must do things that seem to offend my brother, and I don't always please him. Does this mean that I don't love him? If there are sometimes disagreements between us, does this mean that I don't love him?"

The answer is in Verse 2: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments." When our actions toward our brother arise, not out of our personal feelings toward him, but out of our love for God and our desire to obey his Word; in other words, when love is expressed by righteousness, then we can be confident that it is really love. Not long ago a Christian girl said to me, "My boyfriend is a Christian, but he wants me to tell a lie for him. He says that if I really love him, I'll tell the lie to protect him. Now, should I do this? If I don't do it, he'll be angry with me and he'll say that I don't love him." I said to her, "Well, tell him this. Tell him you love him enough to refuse to lie for him and thus encourage his tendency to falsification. It is wrong and harmful, destructive to his life, and tell him you love him enough to tell him the truth about his lying."

That is what John is referring to here. Sometimes love must do the unpleasant thing. If it is an unpleasant thing that is being done because it is prompted by love to God and obedience to his commandments, well then, it is love, even though it makes someone angry, or upsets them temporarily. Do not be disturbed by that reaction. Love sometimes must be cruel to be kind. Here is the wretchedness of what we ordinarily call "white lies." I have come in my own thinking to regard white lies as the blackest of all. They are the most dangerous, they are the most deadly, they often do more harm than the outright lie. What is a white lie? It is a way of pleasing yourself by avoiding displeasing another person. You tell them a little fib about how they look, or act toward you with unpleasantness. Thus, we avoid making others angry with us by using white lies. But if you think that through, you will see that what we are really doing is loving ourselves more than them. We do not want to be hurt by their reaction, so we avoid telling them the truth.

What it really amounts to is that we do not love them enough to help them face the truth. Consequently, some of them may go on for days, weeks, even years doing things that offend others and never understanding what their problem is, and we call that love! It is not love, it is hate, it is dislike. It is a refusal to face, and to help them face the truth. Only the truth delivers, only the truth sets free. If you can gently and graciously help another to see a fault, without yourself becoming self-righteous, priggish and condescending, then you know that you love that person with God's love. "By this we know that we love the children of God," if we are acting out of love for God and a concern for his commandments.

The wonderful thing is that when you do that, you discover the truth of Verse 3. "For this is the love of

God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome [or grievous]." They are not difficult, though they seem to be at first. Who of us has not recoiled at having to talk to someone about an unpleasant subject? Who has not wished that someone else would do it, take on the responsibility? How easily we shove it off on another, if we can. Yet, if we do it, if we will really love another to the point of helping him face unpleasant truth, we will discover that the results are not burdensome but delightful. If done in the right way we find it easy and delightful, producing riches of friendship and blessing.

I must confess that some of my dearest friends now are those whom once I didn't like -- until they told me the truth. When I faced up to it I discovered that my enmity to them arose, not out of anything in them, but something in me. They became my friends because they dared to tell me the truth. Also, some of my closest friends are those to whom, in love, I have gone and painfully, perhaps, with great difficulty at first laid open some wound that was festering and needed to be cleansed. It was not easy to do, but when it was all over and the pain had subsided and the inflammation was gone, there was born a warm and wonderful friendship that has deepened ever since. This is the activity of love. See how practical this apostle gets. If we love with God's love we will do so out of a concern for his commandments, for righteousness. There you have the blending of the three marks of authentic Christianity: belief in the truth, an obedience to God's Word, and a manifestation of love. Those are the signs. These prove that anyone who possesses them has been born of God. Verses 4 and 5 then give us the results that will naturally follow:

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? {1 Jn 5:4-5 RSV}

There you have the whole picture set in focus. When we seek to show love to others, to obey the Word, and to proclaim these doctrinal truths of the Scriptures, there is sometimes a tendency for us to feel that our success as Christians is a result of our faithful efforts. We get an Elijah complex: "We're the only ones left who are true to God." We tend to regard others as being unfaithful in varying degrees. But when we feel like that, we are never so wrong as then. For John now declares that through these activities to overcome the world, it never is a result of our efforts. Effort is involved, but the results do not come from that. Victory is a sign that we have the Lord himself within us. Our efforts are but a sign of the presence of the life of God, the Lord Jesus himself. Without that, everything else would be futile. It is not we who overcome the world, but it is he in us. All that we contribute is simply the fact that we believe in his life at work in us. Thus, our faith in him overcomes the world.

Now, when you consider what is involved in this term *the world*, what it is we are up against, you can see what John means. Think of the moral pressures that we face in the world today, the outlook and standards of the godless society that are surrounding us, ambient on every side, pressing in upon us, constantly intruding upon our consciousness with tremendous pressure to make us to conform to these attitudes and standards of life. Think of the temptation to cheat and to lie, to get ahead at all costs, to be dishonest, to overreach; not only in filling out our income tax but in every aspect of business. You men know that it takes power to be honest in business. To be surrounded by the low moral standards which exist in many businesses today, to be under constant temptation to take advantage of people, to maneuver, manipulate, ride roughshod over other people's rights, and yet do right; it takes power to live in that kind of society. You who live in it know that it does.

These are the pressures that come upon us from the world: The pressure to sexual looseness which is especially evident among the young and the unmarried. Pressure to feed the fire, to satisfy the urge, to give in, to give up, to go the whole way, though it may be wrong and deadly. The pressures around us are tremendous these days, seemingly overpowering at times. There is the pressure to harbor wrong

ideas, to react against others the way the world reacts, to strike back, to fight back, and give as good as you get, to be resentful and jealous, to be ambitious and cruel. There are pressures to follow some of the attractive heresies that are about us in these theologically loose days, which offer popularity and social acceptance. Do you not feel all this? The world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- all this is of the world.

Well, how do you overcome it? How can you manifest the life of Jesus Christ in the midst of that kind of pressure? How can you go on, moment by moment, day after day, year after year, living a life that is absolutely contrary to that, based on totally different standards, totally different objectives, totally different evaluations; how do you do it? And to endure not only for ten years, but twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty years, against that kind of moral pressure. How do you do it? How do you overcome the world? How do you keep steady; how do you keep unmoved in the midst of this? Not only to keep unmoved but actually move out and win others to your side? Well, John says it is "by faith," that is all. Not by the faith that you once exercised twenty years ago when you first became a Christian, but by faith in the life of Jesus present in you now. By faith in him at work in you, moment by moment, in the midst of the pressure, countering it with the pressure of his own life.

Remember that story in Exodus 17 when Israel was moving out of Egypt and they came into the desert and the Amalekites came against them and fought with them at Rephidim? The battle waged hot. All the forces of Israel were engaged in combat with this ruthless enemy which was forever standing to thwart their pathway, trying to keep them from reaching the goal of God -- the land of promise. We read that Israel and Amalek fought together and the battle went against Israel until Moses went on the mountainside and took his rod (which was always the symbol of dependence upon the power of God, the supernatural might of God), and lifting it up toward the heavens he found that Israel began to prevail against the Amalekites. Their fighting was then of value, it accomplished something. Moses stood with his arm and rod extended and as long as he could hold the rod up the battle went for Israel and they prevailed against Amalek. But Moses' arm grew tired and gradually he let it come down. As the rod fell the tide of battle turned. Amalek began to conquer, despite all the fighting of Israel. Moses gathered enough strength to lift his arm again and the tide of battle turned. It became very apparent that the issue of the battle did not lie with the fighting of Israel but in the symbol of dependence on the power of an invisible God. It was this that turned the tide. Remember that at last Aaron and Hur came and stood on each side of Moses and held his arms up, and thus the battle was won. Now that is a picture of the battle that you and I are engaged in. How do you win? Well, the issue does not lie in your fighting. You do need to fight. You do need to pray, and read the Scriptures, and study, and know God's Word. You need to apply it in every situation. You need to put on the whole armor of God when the enemy comes against you like a roaring lion, sweeping all before him. You do need to stand. But none of this is of any avail unless you are recognizing that it is the life of God within you that makes the difference, it is he who wins. It is he who overcomes. Your dependence is on his activity in you. When you do that, it is a different story.

I once heard of a captain of a ship who was describing what it was like to go through a storm. He described the ship in the midst of mountainous seas, the waves mounting on every side, and the wind blowing hard with the pitiless rain coming down. The ship seems a helpless victim of the storm, caught up in the power of these mighty elements that are raging on every side. Its doom seems sure. But he said, "I stand there on the bridge of the ship and I grasp the railing. I can feel the throb, throbbing of the engines deep down inside the hull. The storm, the wind, and the waves seem to be saying to the ship, 'You cannot come, you cannot come.' But I hear the answering throb of the engines saying, 'Yes, we shall, yes, we shall, yes, we shall.' And so we do." That is the way the battle is won. That is the way we overcome the world.

If we give in, if we reflect the same attitudes as the world, if our actions are the same as those of

worldlings, we have succumbed to the world, we are victims of it. We have succumbed to the wiles of the devil. We have lost our testimony, and all possible power to witness. But if our dependence is on the life of the Son of God, moment by moment, his life is in us then, "this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith." Who is it that overcomes the world but he who continues to believe that Jesus is the Son of God? The Son of God, the Strong One, the One who could say to his disciples, "be of good cheer; I have overcome the world," {John 16:33b KJV}. God grant that our faith may be strong in him.

Prayer:

Our Father, these words both thrill us and chill us. We sense the sound of the trumpet, the call to battle against the subtle and devious forces of a worldly age. We know that these forces are designed to throttle us, to choke us, to render us incomplete, unable to live, filled with tensions, pressures, neuroses, fears and uncertainties, as is the world around us. But this is never your desire for us, Father. You have made full and ample provision that we might overcome the world. Not only here in this place where it is easy to do so, but out there where we are working and living, where we are up against the pressures, powers, pull and twist of society. Lord, there is where we are to overcome. Grant that here in this congregation there may be hundreds who will take renewed faith in your power and move out to meet a world in a venture of faith that makes every day a thrilling adventure where they discover again the power of a living Christ to meet the pressures of a dying world. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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