



Letters of Love
#14 Faith
Courage Church, Detroit,
MI
July 8, 2018
scriptures: 1 John 5:1-5,
Romans 8:15, James 2:19,
Ephesians 2:8, Galatians
5:20-21, Genesis 29:20

-

1 John 5:1-5

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. 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. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. **And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.** Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

-

I am going to share something with you today about the Greek word “faith” - and it may shift your thinking a little bit. Hopefully, it does. But before I explain that, I want to make it very clear that: by saying what I will say... I am NOT in any way saying that you are SAVED by anything but grace. The Gospel message is so simple... WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE BECAUSE OF WHAT JESUS DID FOR US.

This is the Gospel:

We realize that we can't save ourselves, that in our own strength we will always fall short... we realize that Jesus lived a perfect life, NEVER sinning, and died in our place, because we do sin, and the wages of sin is death.

And we believe with all of our hearts that Jesus IS powerful enough to save us when we can not save ourselves.

That is the Gospel!

But most people confuse getting into Heaven someday, with the Kingdom of Heaven now. A lot of people view eternity as a “someday” thing, when really eternity is a “from now until forever” thing.

and we believe that God wants to make us into the kind of people who’s daily lives contribute to the telling of the Jesus story.

We believe that the entire Bible is the story of Jesus... and not just the fact that He died for us... but also the fact that He Resurrected... and He ascended... and He is now sitting at the right hand of God... We believe Jesus is Lord, and we believe that Jesus is King and we believe that we are ambassadors for Him here on earth... meaning our loyalty is to Jesus, and to the things that Jesus asks of us.

We exist to make Him known to our world, because we genuinely believe that He is the **ONLY HOPE FOR OUR WORLD.**

We believe that we get to be a part of making all things new here and now... finding solutions to problems... being active in our community.

Very very little of what the Gospel is all about is in regards to “someday later” - yes... we have a blessed hope that one day everything will be made new... but at the end of the day, what God does with eternity is **OUT OF OUR HANDS...**

but what **WE DO** with the world He has given us **NOW, IS IN OUR HANDS.**

So that is where we focus.

But we read words like faith - and even what John says here about “believing in God” - and we think that is the end all... yet John makes it clear that **IF** you believe in God... there should then be a result: love.

The Gospel power in your life is not merely a saving power, it is also a transformative power!

And if you read this whole letter, you see the way that John circles, constantly returning to the idea that the Gospel should be making you more loving... from loving God to loving people and how the first demonstrates the second and as we see in this passage, the second demonstrates the first.

Love should just create this circle of loving God and loving others... that is a lifeline... an energy that fuels community and interactions and conversations and compassion for others.

And I am going to try and help you understand this passage as best as I can... but I felt like I needed to frame all that for you first.

-

One thing that I think people overlook in the flow of this book is that chapter 4 ends by talking about FEAR... and chapter 5 BEGINS by talking about FAITH. Two things that are often considered opposites, but in reality they are more related, than they are opposites.

Now, there are all sorts of problems with fear...

if you become a Christian *because* of fear... as in - because you are afraid of what will happen if you don't become a Christian, then you will live your whole life believing you can lose the Gospel as easily as you gained it.

If fear is the driving factor in your God encounter, it will be the dictating factor in your God experience.

I have said for years that the church needs to do away with the turn or burn mindset... because it is causing people to make emotional decisions out of fear, and the moment they realize what happens they are going to question the decision. I think as a whole, the church has improved a lot on that...

There is a very powerful statement that says "whatever you win someone with, you will have to keep them with" - and it applies here. If you become

a Christian because of fear... you will only remain a Christian as long as you remain afraid of whatever it is that caused you to do it in the first place.

That is an awful, fruitless, debilitated way to live out your Christian life.

So on the contrary, the goal is to WIN PEOPLE BY OUR LOVE. That is what Jesus says, "they will know you by your love" -

And in today's message, John tells us what our victory is that overcomes the world... and its not our fear...

you won't change the world by making a decision out of fear...

But John says this in the second half of verse 4:

And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

People often believe that fear and faith are opposites... But they are not opposites. They are actually the exact same thing, directed in opposite places. Fear takes every bit as much faith to believe as faith in Jesus does.

Maybe more.

It takes just as much faith to believe that you have a reason to be afraid, as it takes to believe that God is in control. And really all fear is, is faith in the wrong thing... its faith that something else is BIGGER than God. When you live your life in fear, you truly are living your life believing that God is not as big as the things in this world that will oppose you.

Just take the book of 1 John. John spends this entire epistle constantly coming back to the concept of Love... and how "God is love" - and how the commandment of Jesus is that we love each other... that we love our neighbor, that we love one another.... Then at the very end of chapter 4 he introduces us to the concept of fear, and shows us how fear is the one thing that will constantly stand in opposition to your love... it is the one thing that will cause you to not do the things that God has put in your heart to do.

But we need to look closely at this, because this one line about faith is surrounded by a lot of words that seem to be saying something more than just “believe in God” - because the entire section is about transformation... about becoming more loving... about keeping the commandments... but yet John says that it is “faith” that will overcome and will be our victory...

real quick... the word “victory” there is the Greek word “*nike*” - for you shoe lovers in here, hopefully that makes sense. Nike literally means “victory” - there is nothing more to that. It was an excellent choice for a company trying to sell a shoe in order to convince its customers that: “if they *if have said shoes*, they will be winners.”

They are the biggest sponsor of the BIGGEST sports stars...

Lebron James

Tiger Woods (who my friend just made a documentary about)

This Ronaldo guy who I have no idea who he is but apparently he is extremely famous for being incredibly good at a game called Soccer.)

and Of course we all know Michael Jordan.

They are the absolute absolute best at what they do.

The word means victory.

But the word “overcome” - actually ALSO comes from the word “*nike*” but its a slightly different word (*nikaō*)... it could mean “to subdue” or “to bring under control” - in other instances it means “to conquer, to overcome, to prevail”

The thing that makes us the Michael Jordan’s of our mission... the thing that makes us overcome... it is not our shoes...

it is our faith.

One thing that is very important when you are studying the Greek or the Hebrew in the Bible, is you have to understand that a lot of those words are somewhat flexible in what they may or may not mean... sometimes

there is more than one potential meaning for a word (like we just saw with “overcome”), and when you are studying it and you are translating it, you are taking a certain amount of liberties with the text while trying to figure out what exactly the writer was trying to say. Its a process that absolutely requires the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

Really, that is what the translators of the Bible do... they go through the Hebrew, and they go through the Greek, and they look at all of the ways that each word is used... and from that they make the determination for what the word most likely means in each instance. And that is part of the reason why we get new and updated translations of the Bible... because we discover documents that show us more clear ways that some of these words were actually used.

Now, it can be easy to think that because words have so many different meanings, that there is just no way to know what the text is really saying, but that is not true. Learning the various ways that these words were used gives us much more clarity to know the way that they are being used in the Bible.

For example, we only get the word “nike” one time in the Bible, and that is “victory” - so unless we have other documents out there that show us the word “nike” used in a different way, all we have to go off of is 1 John 5:4.

and we have to figure out... what is “*nike*” saying that would be the missing piece to this sentence full of other words that we do see in other places... and have more clarity on.

A lot of these words show up in lots of places in the Bible, and in other writings, and so when we get the word used in DIFFERENT ways at different times, it gives the translators the job of then having to determine what the writer actually was saying in each instance.

The word faith is one of those words.

The Greek word for “faith” is the word “*pistis*” -

“*pistis*” can be defined as “a moral conviction”

- when it is used in reference to Christ, it is typically used in a way similar to this: “a strong and welcome conviction or belief that Jesus is the Messiah, through whom we obtain eternal salvation in the kingdom of God”

which is loaded and covers A LOT, and seems to be a kind of complicated way to explain what most of us understand faith to be.

Another context we see “*pistis*” used is “the *character* of **one** that can be **relied on**”

which we will get back to that one.

Now... The word Faith, throughout the New Testament is used typically to describe a BELIEF in Jesus...

Even here in 1 John 5:5 “Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who *believes* that Jesus is the Son of God?” - believe is the word: *pisteuō* (piss-2-o) which comes from *pistis*. They are almost the same word, but NOT exactly the same.

Its as close as *nike* is to *nikaō*.

In the same way that overcoming and victory are directly connected... but yet not the same.

For example: Nobody would quote Ephesians 2:8 by saying “we are saved by grace through belief in Jesus alone” - anybody familiar with the scriptures would hear that and they would likely feel kind of weird about it... but yet that is what most people in their minds THINK that it is saying.

But slight differences in words can make a BIG difference.

There can be no doubt that faith and belief are directly connected to each other. I would say that belief is the first step in having faith, but its not the exact same thing as having faith even though most of us have always considered them the same.

so if we were to say “we have faith in Jesus” what most of us are really saying is that we believe that it is true that Jesus Christ is God... that God

sent His only Son into the world, and He lived a perfect life, then died on a cross FOR OUR SINS, but death could not hold Him down, and three days later He Resurrected from the dead.” - right? you believe the right things.

Which IS IMPORTANT. But its not the end.

James 2:19 says “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!”

The New Living Translation, which is more of a paraphrase and not a literal translation says it like this: “You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror.”

You think that you have faith simply because you believe it? You think that a mere belief in the existence of God is the *same* as faith in Jesus Christ? No! Even the demons believe... they know that God exists, they know that Jesus exists... yet they tremble in terror.

So true faith is something more than just belief. James pairs it with works of righteousness, saying that even though he is not saved by his works, his works PROVE his faith.

But the word itself, *pistis* and the ways that it is used, actually offers us some insight into the depth of its meaning.

See, in our world, we can dumb the word down “faith” to “belief” simply because we live in a world that defaults to doubt. A lot of people simply don’t believe that any of it is real at all, and so IT IS A HUGE STEP, to merely come to the realization that “there is a God”

You look at the world, you look at the universe, you look at the way that everything is so perfectly aligned and you realize “there is just no way that all of this is an accident.”

But beyond belief, loaded into the many ways that word “*pistis*” is used throughout the Bible and other writings from the ancient word, is also the concept of an oath to someone... a statement of loyalty that you stand by forever. A word a lot of people use to describe it is the word “allegiance”

Jesus is King, seated on the throne next to God, and simply believing in the King's existence is one thing, a step in the right direction... but it falls short of any sort of life that will make an impact on culture and society and on peoples lives here.. You won't overcome the world just by acknowledging that there is another one. You have to ENGAGE THE ONE THAT YOU DO HAVE WITH THE NEWS THAT YOU HAVE HEARD.

Acknowledging the King's existence is one thing... aligning your life by the King's purpose... that is something different entirely.

A scholar named Matthew Bates wrote a book all about allegiance being an appropriate translation of *pistis*. It is fascinating, and worth considering.

Basically, the idea is that *pistis* is a loyalty that says "I am with Jesus, and the way of Jesus, even when it is not the way of America, or the way of my friends, or the way that is going to give me the most comfortable life."

When you read it this way, it also explains why John puts such an emphasis at the beginning of this passage to say that Jesus is the Son of God and has been born of God... because in those day in Rome all of the coins that would circulate in order to make purchases would have this inscription on them that said DIVIF - which meant "Son of the Divine" and had a picture of Caesar on them...

the coins essentially said "Caesar is the Son of God"

it was a common practice of the Roman armies to attack Christians and ask them "who is their Lord" and if they said "Caesar" then the army would leave them alone but if they said "Jesus" they would often be made slaves or even killed.

But what John is saying, even in an extremely tense political climate... is that the thing that will overcome the world is allegiance to... loyalty to... faith in... Jesus.

It is more than just belief. And in John's day, it was getting people killed BY THE VERY WORLD SYSTEM THAT JOHN SAYS FAITH WILL ULTIMATELY OVERCOME.

But do you see how fear can have no part in a faith like that? You can't have allegiance to Jesus while being a slave to the fear of what could happen because of it.

Remember what Paul says in Romans 8:15 -

“For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”

God didn't overcome the world so that you could be afraid of it. He didn't defeat death so that you could fear death.

The spirit of fear is a spirit of slavery... it is absolute bondage. It is loyalty to a power that has control over your life... and if you have it, you will not be who God created you to be.

-

or maybe this would be an easier way for you to understand it:

“*pistis*” - as it is used here in 1 John for “faith” is identical to the word used in Galatians 5 for the Fruit of the Spirit... which, because its talking about fruit IN US, the most accurate usage of the word there is something like: “the character of one that can be **relied on**” - we did an entire sermon on that a couple of years ago...

And so usually when we think of “faith” we think that it is just “us believing that God can be relied on” - that we can trust God. But the fruit of the Spirit, at least the way that the fruit of the Spirit is *now* translated, uses the word “faithfulness” - as in, something that **we** can become... its a fruit of the Spirit... when the Spirit lives in us, we become someone who can be relied on.

Someone who God knows that we will be there when one of his children has a need... someone who will not waver in our love for God or love for others even when the going gets tough.

Faith is not just belief, because the Gospel is not just about where you are going. It is also about what we are creating here.

Faith is an allegiance to that belief that can not be brought down by our circumstances. It turns us into someone who is FAITHFUL. And if we are going to truly be ambassadors for Jesus in our city like 2 Corinthians 5 calls us to be, then we need to make sure that we are faithful to the one whom we represent.

The victory that will overcome the world is not a bunch of people who JUST BELIEVE THE RIGHT THINGS... the victory that will overcome the world is when the church understands that belief IS ONLY THE FIRST STEP in changing your heart... and as your heart changes, your life begins to reflect that change IN our world...

so love becomes your default... and taking care of your neighbor becomes your default. And sharing and serving become the way that we live our lives because we are so devoted to the Savior of the world and every single day as our faith continues to grow, we are being made more and more in His image... and His image, as we have already learned... is love.

Our belief that Jesus is Lord should lead us to an instant reaction that springs us to our feet and leads us to take whatever action is necessary to show as many people as possible the Good News: That Jesus is Lord... that they don't have to live in hopelessness anymore.

That The corrupt systems will eventually fail but LOVE WILL LAST FOREVER.

and thats a big job and it may come at a cost. It certainly came at a cost for the Apostle John and his friends.

But yet in the midst of all of that, John was able to confidently say these words:

his commandments are not burdensome.

this is what I believe about that... as to why... as to how its not burdensome to do something like be faithful to a mission that basically by definition... IS A BURDEN.

I believe that John had come to a place in his own life in which he so completely embodied the love of Jesus everywhere that He went... He loved people genuinely EVERYWHERE THAT HE WENT...

and he was SO FAITHFUL TO THAT LOVE, that even the hard things came easy.

Because difficult things are not difficult when they are done in love.

When Jacob wanted to marry Rachel, Laban, her Father worked out a deal with Jacob that Jacob would have to work for him for seven years before he could marry his daughter... and the Bible says that Jacob served, and those seven years felt like only a few days because of how much he loved her.

He didn't see the burden... he saw the return, and LOVE MADE IT EASY... suddenly, it wasn't too much to carry. Seven years felt like a few days... BECAUSE OF LOVE.

if we can just begin to see people through that same filter... through a lens that says "they are worth it" then it won't feel so heavy every time you try and do something for someone else.

Allegiance to Jesus... Faithfulness to Jesus... means faithfulness to His mission and His mission is and always will be PEOPLE.

If we can get over the fact that we worked for the things that we have, it will become so much easier to GIVE IT TO SOMEONE WHO MAYBE NEEDS IT MORE THAN WE DO.

The Burden is as heavy as we make it.

and you are probably wondering... what do I mean by that?

Paul, in Romans (12:9) talks about how our love needs to be genuine.

if its fabricated... we aren't going to be faithful to it. If our love for God is fabricated, it will waver...

if your love is not genuine, then anything that you do for another person will feel like a sacrifice... which ultimately will feel like a burden.

WHICH MEANS ULTIMATELY WE WILL STOP DOING IT.

if your love for another IS GENUINE, then everything that you do for another person becomes a blessing, not a burden.

-

When Dawn and I were dating, for her birthday I bought her a brand new iPod... it was awesome, it was the black iPod's with the scrolling circle thing before there was touch screen... it was the first version that could play videos... I had the previous years model myself but mine couldn't play the videos... I was so excited to get this for her.

I loaded it up with a ton of music for her, and even wrote a song and recorded it and made a little slide show of pictures of us and put it on there for her...

I saved and saved to get it for her... and it was MY JOY to finally be able to give it to her. I didn't think about what it cost or think about how I had no money left in my account after I had bought it.

So I gave it to her on her birthday.

But just a couple of weeks later, she was in the library at school and someone stole it from her.

and when she told me, she was devastated... she was on the phone with me when she realized it was gone... and she was just heart broken...

and I didn't have enough money to buy another one, but I did have an older one that I was using... and without hesitation I determined "I will just give her mine."

So she was downgraded... but it was something.

and even though I listened to that thing every day before that day, there was not a day that went by after, that I ever missed that iPod.

in fact, every time I thought about it, I was happy... not sad.

Because it was another opportunity to demonstrate my love for her... it was another opportunity to be faithful to what was in my heart toward her. And show her what she meant to me.

And I am not going to stand up here and tell you that every time I do anything for anyone I have that same kind of heart and mindset... but that is the goal. People aren't burdens... they are people... they are God's treasured possessions... we have to get be faithful to do what God has called us to do in other people's lives...

and we won't ever get there if we are totally wrapped up in what we want Him to do in ours. We won't get there if we spend all our time thinking about ourselves...

But what if there is a better way than that anyway? What if living a selfish life is actually costing you more?

it takes GREAT FAITH to build a life that is not about yourself - but if you really think about it... it takes an even greater faith to build a life that is ONLY about yourself.

Because whatever you BUILD by yourself, you will forever BARE by yourself.

and you may get to the top, but there will be no-one there with you to enjoy your fleeting world.

And for me... for my family... for this church... I want us to put our faith in THE RIGHT THING. I want us to use our faithfulness toward the right thing. The Gospel. The Church. The Message of Jesus Christ.

Today's passage about faith overcoming...

It could just be as accurately translated: **this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faithfulness.**

The way we respond to what we see. The way we respond to what God tells us. How we learn the way of Jesus until it becomes the only way.

God responds to faith, but faith requires faithfulness to it. And every time you step out in faith, and do something that seems crazy, or seems like it is not smart even though it may be generous...

you give God a chance to show up. And He always does. Every single time.