

1 John 5

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[0 : 00] children to eat later on. Before we begin, I would like us just to come before the Lord in prayer once again. Let's pray. Father God, thank you so much that what we are about to read and meditate on, it is not just the words of men, but it is your own holy word. Thank you for the enormous privilege we have of being able to hear the very thoughts of God.

And Lord, I ask that we would not just speak and listen as if this were a dry lecture, but rather we would really feel your presence among us. We would really learn from you that you would expand our minds to see the great depths of your love for us and to understand what it is you would have us do in your world. Amen. So if you do have Bibles with you, if you would turn them to 1 John chapter 5, and this morning we're just going to be looking at the first five verses. I'll be reading from the English Standard Version, but whichever version you're using will be absolutely fine.

So I'll just read for us these first five verses now. 1 John chapter 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?

When I was at university, I studied history, which was a degree that I had a fantastic time studying. And so now whenever I go on holiday, I always try and visit one castle or one stately home, which is something that I enjoy enormously, and it's something that Helen tolerates enormously.

[2 : 25] And one of the things that you'll often find in these castles and stately homes are tapestries. So a great big image, it might be the image of the family who owned the house, or it might be a scene that's woven together out of threads.

And they're absolutely beautiful. Now if you ever wanted to pull just one thread from that tapestry, you would find you would run into a number of problems.

The first one is that you would probably get in an extraordinary amount of trouble and would be very quickly thrown out of that stately home. But the other problem is, with a tapestry, it is woven together so finely that you cannot possibly pull away one thread without pulling away them all.

And that's what we find in this first letter of John. John is talking about what it looks like to be a Christian. And because God changes every part of our lives, we find that John talks about multiple threads, all overlapping, such that you can't easily just take one of them.

That said, in this passage here today, we are just going to be trying to focus on one of these threads in particular. And through that, hopefully we're going to get to understand the entire passage and what it's talking about.

[3 : 45] And the thread that I wanted to focus on in particular was something that John says at the end of verse 3. And his commandments, that is God's commandments, are not burdensome.

And the reason I want to focus on that in particular is because when I read that, I think, hang on a minute, that doesn't make any sense at all. God's commandments actually feel extremely burdensome sometimes.

There are lots and lots of things that I would very much like to do that God says explicitly that I must not do. On the other hand, there are many things that I would rather not do that God commands that I do.

Things like he says, I must love all people around me, even my enemies, as myself. He says that I must not judge anyone, even the people who seem most in need of being judged.

He says that my possessions and my time, all of it is disposable and dispensable in his service. And that I need to be willing to give up anything at a moment's notice, even my own family.

[5 : 05] That all seems terribly burdensome to me. And perhaps you feel the same way sometimes. And so what we're going to do in this passage, we're going to follow this thread backwards, first of all, and ask one question, why do we need to follow God's commandments?

So we'll be looking at verses 1 to 3 for that. And then we're going to follow the thread forward through the passage and ask, why are these commandments not burdensome? That will be found in verses 4 and 5.

So first of all, let's ask that first question, why do we need to follow God's commandments? And before we go any further, there's one thing I want to stress that is not the reason for us to follow God's commandments.

Some of you may be here today, you may just be visiting. Maybe you're not a Christian and you've come because a friend's invited you. Or maybe you are a Christian, but you've still got lots of questions.

And either way, you're very, very much welcome here. You're warmly welcome. We're so glad to have you with us. And thank you so much for coming to worship with us today. And we do welcome you to ask any questions of any one of us after the service.

[6 : 16] But what I want you and everyone here to understand, first of all is, we do not follow God's commandments so that he will love us and accept us.

We do not follow God's commandments so he will love us and accept us. In fact, John says something quite different right at the very beginning.

In verse one, he says this, everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. Now, some of you may know this, Christ is a technical term.

It literally translates as anointed one. But in the Bible, it's used to refer to God's chosen king and savior of the whole world. And it's interesting, John doesn't say, we are born of God by trying really hard.

He doesn't say we are born of God by keeping God's commandments. No, he says, everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. And that's a wonderful truth.

[7 : 24] Because it means that we do not need to fix ourselves before God will accept us. We do not need to make ourselves scrub up and look nice.

We do not need to get a job or get married or get slimmer. We do not need to make the perfect New Year's resolution. Rather, all we need to do is put our trust in Jesus as our Lord and our Savior.

That is what makes us God's child. That is what makes us acceptable to God. That is what earns us the divine, I love you, the divine, well done, good and faithful servant.

Not our works, but our faith. I cannot stress that enough. So then you might ask, well, if we are children of God just by believing in Jesus, why are we told to keep God's commandments?

What's the point of it? Well, John follows a chain of logic here and I want you to follow it with me. First of all, he says this in verse 1, everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.

[8 : 38] I wonder if you have noticed as I have, when you look at a family that is a really tight-knit family, a family that is a really wonderful, warm, loving family, the first thing you notice is that they all love one another, don't they?

The parents love the children, they would do anything for them. The children love the parents and the children love one another. There may be disagreements, there may be fallouts, but at the end of the day you can tell a really solid family by the fact that they all love one another so much.

And it is exactly the same, John tells us, with God's family. You can recognize the children of God because, just like any good family, they love one another.

And then John goes on, well, how do we show love for each other then? He says this in verse 2, 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.

Now this seems a bit circular at first sight, doesn't it? It says, well, children of God who love God, they love his children and how do we show we love God's children?

[9 : 49] by loving God. It seems to go a bit in a circle but when you think about it, it actually makes an awful lot of sense. You see, if I want to perfectly love someone, surely the best way of doing that is by following the commandments of a perfectly loving God.

And that's what follows through, of course, when we do read the New Testament and the Lord's commandments to us there. We read that whatever our other gifts may be, that love is the most important of them.

We read that we are to share our belongings with those in need, not just our brothers and sisters but with the whole world. We read that we are to rejoice with those who rejoice.

We read that we are to mourn with those who mourn. The commandments of God, they are perfectly loving. And I find this very helpful when I come across some of God's commands that actually seem to jar with me because sometimes we do that, don't we?

We turn to a command and we think, gosh, that doesn't sound loving, that sounds actually, that sounds quite scary, I'm not sure I like that command at all. But what encourages my heart is that this is a command from a God who has proven himself time and time again to be perfectly loving.

[11 : 14] And I'm encouraged by that because I realize actually sometimes I am not perfectly loving and perhaps when I come across a commandment that is so difficult, perhaps the problem lies with my heart, not with God's.

The fact that God proves himself loving over and over again means that we can trust him even with the most difficult of commands to know that it will lead to love and blessing.

So you see, the reason we need to keep God's commandments is not so God will love us but because he already has loved us.

We obey God's commandments not to be accepted but we obey because we already are accepted. God has loved us and brought us into his family and therefore we love him, we love one another and therefore we obey his commands.

It is love at every step of the journey. There's a bit of a cliché in Christianity isn't there that Christianity is not a religion it is a relationship.

[12 : 21] Now I'm not sure that's always particularly helpful I think that sometimes leads to confusion but there's one way that is very helpful in that it forces us to think of our walk with God as that relationship rather than obeying a set of rules.

He's our father He's our family. I think the best way of illustrating this is to have a look at wedding vows. When wedding vows are recited really when you think about it they're promising to obey commands aren't they?

A married couple they're promising to stay with one another till death do them part they're promising to stay with each other for richer for poorer in sickness and in health but of course when you see a married couple making their vows they don't look like they're binding themselves to burdensome commands they look like they're giving themselves up to wonderful privileges because of course they love one another and that is exactly the same for a Christian and the Lord His commands do not feel burdensome rather they feel like privileges but that does lead us nicely back to our central thread this verse saying and His commands are not burdensome and we are going to ask our second question now well why are these commands not burdensome and John explains in the very next verse for everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world now when John talks about the world here he's not talking about the world we see all around as the world we see outside what we would call planet earth that's the planet that God created at the very beginning and pronounced it good it's the world that is groaning waiting for its redemption waiting for the return of Christ when all things will be made new it's the world that God loved so much that He gave

His only son for it now what John is talking about here is the world that is opposed to God those parts of the world that hate God and want to see us separated from Him those parts of the world that tempt us and drag us away from keeping God's commandments and there's two ways in which the world does this that the Bible talks of the first way is through persecution that's a really common theme throughout the Bible persecution it's not something we face so much ourselves in this country and we can praise God for that and be very grateful for that but certainly as we've already been praying about persecution is faced by our brothers and sisters all over the world perhaps in this country the people among us who might face the most persecution actually would be our children and young people certainly growing up as a Christian in a school environment is something that is actually extremely difficult we certainly should be praying for our children and young people as they face so many challenges so many difficulties and so many temptations but the second way the world tries to pull us away from keeping

God's commandments and this is the one I want to open up a little bit this morning it's a phenomenon that Jesus describes in Matthew's gospel in Matthew chapter 13 he tells the parable of the sower he talks about a man who represents God walking through a field scattering the seed which represents the good news of faith in Jesus and salvation through Jesus and he talks about the various different kinds of soil that seed falls on and one of the kinds of soil he talks about is soil that is full of thorns and weeds and the grain does grow but before it can bear fruit it gets choked by the fessiles and it shrivels away when Jesus is asked by his disciples later well what does that mean he explains that the thorny ground represents the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth and I think for us that is the great danger we face in this nation it is equally as lethal to the Christian as persecution it may not be as direct it may not be as abrupt or violent or dangerous physically but it chokes us from bearing fruit of good works just as surely this year is the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I and in the course of my studies

[17:04] I read a number of diaries of soldiers who fought in World War I and the interesting thing I found about that you would expect the diaries to be just full of battles and battles and bloodshed and certainly to a certain extent there were battles that you read of and it was quite harrowing but the thing that I noticed was the main picture you get is just of tiredness and mud and poor food and difficulties and the mourning of lost friends just this kind of slow regular ache this day to day low level suffering that those brave soldiers endured and it is a bit like that sometimes in the Christian life occasionally you will come across a great battle a great conflict you will be being battered by Satan dragged away from the Lord but more often than not it will just be the small things the mud and the tiredness the thorns of this life you're not sure where your next job is going to come from you're uncertain that you're going to have enough money to pay the bills you already have enough money but you feel you just need that little tiny bit more perhaps you're feeling very lonely or perhaps you're not lonely at all rather you've got so many people in your life so many friends and children and family you don't know how you can possibly take care of them all you know that the Lord demands that you be generous with your time and your money but you know if you do that that's going to be a massive lifestyle change and you're not sure if you can cope with that your children are sick or unwell and you don't know how they're going to get better you're finding marriage more difficult than you thought it would be and you don't know how you can last much longer so this is the challenge that the world brings and in the face of that

John's promise that everyone who's been born of God overcomes the world it sometimes rings a little hollow doesn't it sometimes we feel well that doesn't match my experience at all I feel very much dragged down by these thorns I feel like my fruit is being choked so how is it that we do overcome the world then how can this promise be true well once again it is not about us pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps it is not about us making ourselves better trying harder we overcome the world in exactly the same way we are brought into God's family this is what John says 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 you see in our own strength we cannot overcome the world but Jesus

Christ already has the wonderful message of the gospel is it's not just that we are saved from our sins by believing in Jesus though that is true it is not just that we become God's children by believing in Jesus though that is wonderfully true when we believe in Jesus the Bible tells us we become one with him we are united with him his sonship becomes our sonship his death is our death his life is our life his ascension and reign is our ascension and reign his victory is our victory Paul Paul puts it like this in his letter to the Galatians in chapter 2 I have been crucified with Christ it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the son of

God who loved me and gave himself for me you see as soon as you believe in Jesus as saviour and lord your old nature that the world prays upon that is dead that is gone of course in this life there are fragments of it still there aren't there there's still it's still in its death throes as it were and that old nature still being there is what gives that tension that we feel it's a tension that Paul describes in Romans 7 he can't understand why when he wants to do the right thing he's still being dragged towards the wrong thing and it's a tension that all the biblical writers know will come John in this very letter in chapter 1 he points out if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves because of course that old nature it is still there but the fact is that old nature has been nailed to the cross with

Jesus it is very much on its way out its authority over us as Christians is gone and only Christ remains the prophet Jeremiah speaking hundreds of years before Jesus was born said this in Jeremiah 31 but this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days after the coming of Jesus declares the Lord I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they will be my people as Christians we have had our old hearts our sinful hearts torn out and a new heart put in that speaks only of Christ and yes there may still be that tension but what I want you to understand is that even that old nature in this life even the world and all its thorns they lose their grip on us when we look to

[23 : 28] Christ in us when we place our faith once again in the great overcomer one of my favorite stories from the gospels is found in Matthew chapter 14 and it tells the story of the disciples rowing over the sea of Galilee late one night and the wind is blowing and the waves are lashing over against the boat and they suddenly look out and they see a figure walking on the water and they are absolutely terrified but suddenly the figure calls out don't be afraid it's me and they realize that it is Jesus and Peter being as Peter often is he leans out and calls to Jesus and says well if it is you command me to walk on the water and Jesus tells him come so there's this amazing moment where Jesus steps out of the boat and finds himself just like his master walking on the water but then suddenly he forgets Jesus standing right in front of him and he begins to concentrate more on the sea in fact

Matthew puts it this way I think this is a lovely phrase Peter sees the wind he notices the wind blowing against his face he notices the waves rising around him he realizes that what he's doing is absolutely impossible and he begins to sink and then Jesus of course takes him by the hand and pulls him out of the water and pulls him safely back onto the boat but just like Peter with the sea so we are with the world if we look too close at the world around us if we concentrate too much on our situation on those waves and that wind around us and if we try and overcome it on our own of course we'll fail and of course the burden of God's commandments will be unbearable because what we're trying to do is walk on water but if instead we look to Jesus ahead of us and we say you have overcome this before will you do it again you have already taken away my sins on the cross will you will you keep me from sinning anymore if we turn every situation into a prayer instead of letting it just ruminate in our mind and trying to fix it if every situation we come across no matter how bad we turn into a prayer to our

Lord and a prayer lead me not into temptation then we will find that as well as having overcome our sins in Christ we will have real victory over our sins in this life as well not a perfect victory by any means but victory nonetheless because the truth is Jesus really does give those of us who believe victory over the world in part in this life and in glorious fullness in the future life to come even if you don't experience that victory right now this moment even if today you are really suffering even if today you are really feeling choked by the thorns and weeds of this world you're really feeling that Jesus' commands are burdensome if you if you believe in him you can know that your sufferings now as serious as they may be will one day seem light and momentary in comparison with the weight of glory you will experience in the life to come and the prayer is that will be a great comfort to those of us who know

Jesus and a great commendation to any of you here who do not know Jesus I really commend this Jesus to you because it's only through him that you will be able to overcome the world it is only through him that you will find yourself born of God and able to keep his commandments and the wonderful thing is that as Jesus says himself his yoke is easy and his burden is light and the reason for that is because he has carried it for us let's come before the Lord and pray once again Father God sometimes when we read parts of your word we find them a struggle and Lord we do confess that all of us do find your commandments burdensome and we confess that all of us at times we are far more concerned with the things of this world they loom far larger in our minds than the glorious truth of your son's death and resurrection and the great salvation he has brought us and

I pray that you would forgive us those moments I thank you that you do understand our weaknesses you do understand all the cares and worries of this life because you've been through them yourself and Lord I pray that you would help all of us to once again turn our hearts towards you place our faith firmly in your son that we would all know that we are children of you through faith in Jesus that we would all know that you have overcome the world and because we are bound to you we as well overcome the world and Lord we pray that you would grant us victory over our sins even in this life as well as we look to you the author and perfecter of our faith Amen well before we finish we will come before the Lord and sing once again it will appear on the screen behind us wonderful grace that gives what I don't deserve pays me what Christ has earned then lets me go free now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy to the only

[29 : 53] God our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory majesty dominion and authority before all time and now and forever Amen