

Series: John's Letters

Title: My Identity in Christ

Text: 1 John 5:1-4

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Verse 1

In the first verse of chapter 5, John aimed to remind his readers of their identity in Christ. He said, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father also loves the one born of him" (1 John 5:1). The word translated "born" referred to a spiritual type of birth. It was used of an event we often call "regeneration." Jesus spoke of the event in John's gospel, saying, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). One theologian has defined regeneration as "The action of the Holy Spirit, who transforms the lives of those given the gift of faith so they experience a 'new birth' and salvation through Jesus Christ."¹ Another has described the concept, saying it is "a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us; sometimes called 'being born again.'"² Paul referenced regeneration when he told Titus, "He saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

Interestingly, John spoke of the act of regeneration with a passive voice verb, using what Bible scholars often call "the divine passive." His intent was to depict the act of regeneration as being performed upon a person. The new birth is something accomplished by God and God alone. No one can create spiritual life in his or her soul. A work of the Lord is needed.

The Lord regenerates a person when one "believes that Jesus is the Christ." Such belief is not a mere acknowledgment of Christ's existence. There were demons who recognized Jesus as the Messiah (Mark 5:6-8), yet they did not exhibit saving faith (Mark 5:9-10). The believers that brings salvation involves a trust, reliance, or confidence in the person and work of Christ. One has noted, "John is not promoting mere intellectual assent as the requirement for being a child of God."³ On the contrary, he advocated for "full surrender to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior."⁴

The word translated "that" in our verse was an important one. It pointed to the content of what one needed to believe in order to be saved.⁵ Considering the heretics' false claims, John wanted to clarify the nature of the Christian message. The Gnostics' low view of Jesus was insufficient. Jesus was more than a good teacher or spiritual emanation from God. He was the Son of God who came in the flesh to live, die, and be raised on behalf of sinful humans. John maintained that one needed to believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ for salvation. The apostles' teachings concerning faith were in alignment with Jesus'

¹ McKim, Donald. M. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 234.

² Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1253.

³ Akin, Daniel L. *The New American Commentary, Volume 38: 1, 2, 3 John*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Holman Publishers, 2001), 189.

⁴ Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament, Volume VI: The General Epistles and the Revelation of John*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), 237.

⁵ Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 598.

words. In His conversation with Nicodemus on the subject of regeneration, our Lord proclaimed, “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

With the words of Jesus in mind, John maintained that when one believed in Christ one was “born of God.” He used a perfect tense verb to portray regeneration as a permanent, life-altering event. The effects of the new birth are continuous. When writing to the church at Corinth, Paul proclaimed, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

John spoke of the life-changing result in verse 1 by mentioning one change that ought to come with regeneration — love. He said, “everyone who loves the Father also loves the one born of Him.” If one is born-again, one will be compelled to love God and others, to fulfill the Great Commandment given by Christ (Matthew 22:37-40). This is true since the Holy Spirit’s presence brings God’s love into our hearts at the new birth (Romans 5:5 and Galatians 5:22). The hate-filled heretics of Asia Minor gave evidence, by their lifestyles (1 John 2:9 and 19), that they were not really regenerate.

John used the metaphor of the family to prove his point. If Christians were born of God, they formed a spiritual family together. In Christ, they became spiritual brothers and sisters. If they really had such a relation, it stands to reason they would be compelled to love one another. One has said, “We prove our love for the common Father by our conduct towards our brothers and sisters in Christ.”⁶ The Gnostics’ unrepentant hate was proof they were not really born-again.

Verse 2

John’s emphasis of love continued in verse 2. He said, “This is how we know that we love God’s children: when we love God and obey his commands” (1 John 5:2). After exposing the Gnostics’ lack of salvation in verse 1, John aimed to affirm the true believers in verse 2. The word translated “know” referred to one understanding something in a “completed sense.”⁷ It was a cherished term the Gnostics liked to use. They boasted of all they knew, even while exhibiting unloving behavior to others.

John wanted the real believers to understand what real love for others looked like. The apostle loved to provide his readers with tests for spiritual realities. Read 1 John 4:2, 9, 10, 13, and 17 for other examples of his use of the method. In our previous verse (1 John 5:1), John had just provided a test, saying that love for others was evidence of love for God. In our current verse, the logic of verse 1 was reversed — love for God was now held up as the evidence of true love for others.

The test of 2 two involved two components — love for God and obedience to His commands. Many in Asia Minor claimed they loved others, but they really didn’t. John wanted the true believers to be discerning. They could spot real love by asking two questions. First, they could simply ask, “Does this person who professes love for others also demonstrate a love for God?” Second, they could ask, “Is this person who professes love living in disobedience to any of God’s commands?”

In regard to the first question, love for God should always precede a love for others. One cannot truly love his or her fellow man if he or she does not have a correct relationship with the Lord. A vertical connection to God is the basis for strong horizontal relationships. If the heart is not in tune with the Father, it cannot exhibit genuine kindness and charity to others. John’s language concerning a love for God in 1 John 5:1 conveys continual activity. A.T.

⁶ Robertson, 237.

⁷ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), 372.

Robertson has said the meaning is “when we keep on loving God.”⁸ An abiding relationship with Christ is the prerequisite for cultivating genuine love for others. Some in Asia Minor exhibited feigned expressions of Christian affection (1 John 3:18). Their problem was that their hearts weren’t right with God. All of their friendly salutations and displays of affection were superficial because they didn’t emanate from a heart that was rooted in Christ.

In regard to the second test, the Gnostics’ displays of love were insincere because they emanated from lives that were openly disobedient to God’s Word. John spoke of the way in which some did not “obey” Christ’s “commands.” The word translated “obey” in the Received Text is one that has commonly been translated “keep.” It was a cognate of a term that spoke of a warden guarding prisoners. It carried the idea “to keep an eye on, to watch, and hence to guard, keep, obey.”⁹

John’s point was that one who was disobedient to Christ’s commands could not have loved others genuinely. The Gnostics’ disregard for the Word of God produced a spiritual breakdown. Christian virtues like love, peace, patience, and kindness were unlikely to grow from a heart that was given over to immorality, adultery, and hatred. Christian love isn’t built upon sentimental display of emotions or man-centered devices of flattery. It comes from a life that is committed to loving and obeying God and His Word. John spoke of this reality earlier when he said, “Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

Verse 3

In verse 3, John further elaborated on the way in which love was a proof of genuine salvation. He said, “For this is what love for God is: to keep his commands. And his commands are not a burden” (1 John 5:3). The phrase “love of God” referred to that type of affection, as one has said, “which has God as the object.”¹⁰ Thus, John did not mean to describe God’s love toward men and women. He meant to speak of the love men and women have toward God.

The language rendered “to keep” contained a term of explanation in the original language.¹¹ John wanted his readers to understand what real love for God was really like. If one truly loved the Lord, he or she would “keep his commands.” As in verse 2, the word rendered “keep” depicted a continual commitment to observing God’s Law. The language conveyed the idea of “keep on keeping His commands.”¹² John meant to show that a lifestyle of obedience should have marked those who were truly born again. Though a genuine Christian may have sinned and stumbled from time to time (1 John 1:8-10), he or she would show a track record of obedience over the long haul. The habitually disobedient revealed they were not true believers.

For those who truly know God, obedience to God’s Law is not a burdensome thing. He or she will still wrestle with the world, the flesh, and the devil at times; however, he or she will have an overarching desire for obedience. The Spirit of God within his or her soul will produce a yearning desire for righteousness. James spoke of such realities in James 4:5.

John maintained that true believers would obey, but he promised much more. He also said that the Lord’s commands would not be “a burden” for them. The Koine Greek word

⁸ Robertson, 237.

⁹ Zodhiates, 1380.

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 598.

¹¹ Robertson, 238.

¹² Robertson, 238.

translated “burden” literally meant “heavy.”¹³ Used figuratively, it depicted rules and regulations that were oppressive and difficult to obey.¹⁴ The same term was used in the Septuagint to portray the heavy burdens experienced by God’s people who returned from the captivity (Nehemiah 5:18). Jesus used it to depict the cumbersome teaching of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:4). Paul implemented it when referencing the duty-oriented doctrine of the supposed super apostles at Corinth (2 Corinthians 10:10).

John spoke of the Gnostics in the same way Jesus and Paul talked about false teachers. The heretics of Asia Minor put unrealistic burdens on people in regard to the Gnostic claims of special knowledge. John wanted the church to know that true regeneration would lead to freedom. True believers didn’t need to live under bondage of unnecessary burdens. The Spirit of God within them would empower them to live the Christian life. God’s presence would produce a craving for obedience.

Verse 4

John spoke of another mark of true Christian living in verse 4. He detailed the way in which genuine believers have victory over the world, saying, “because everyone who has been born of God conquers the world. This is the victory that has conquered the world: our faith” (1 John 5:4). John’s reference to one being “born of God” refers back to His teaching from 1 John 3:3-6 and 5:1. Regeneration was on his mind once again.

The apostle wanted his readership to remember that the new birth ensured victory over “the world.” The Greek word translated “world” appeared earlier in John’s writings (1 John 2:2, 15, 16, 17; 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1, 3, 5, 9, 14, 17). As used by the apostle, it referred to the evil system through which Satan attempted to distract human hearts from the realities of God. Man’s archenemy, along with his demonic forces, continually strives to ensnare people by his three-fold temptation strategy — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). Jesus called Satan “the ruler of the world” (John 14:30).

Though Satan is powerful, he is not all-powerful. Victory over his schemes was possible for believers in Asia Minor. To express the nature of the Christian’s spiritual victory, John used one of his favorite terms — “conquers.” In fact, twenty-five of the twenty-eight occurrences of the term in the New Testament came from John’s pen (John 16:33; 1 John 2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4, 5; Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 5:5; 6:2; 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7). Rendered “conquers” in our verse, the word was one that was often used of successful Roman military campaigns, or of champion athletes in the ancient games. It is the word from which we get our term “Nike.” Though John was surely not familiar with the popular brand of modern, athletic footwear, contemporary readers can perhaps gain a better understanding of the term by understanding how it is used in modern contexts.

Such victory, according to John, was possible through “faith.” An unwavering, habit-of-life trust in Christ could enable true believers to stand strong against the anti-Christian attacks in their assemblies (1 John 2:18). The faith John had in mind wasn’t necessarily the saving type of faith. His readers had expressed that type of faith at regeneration (1 John 5:1). To experience the overcoming life, they needed sanctifying faith — an abiding trust in Jesus.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul upheld such trust as the key overcoming the Wicked One. He said, “In every situation take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” (Ephesians 6:17). As it was in Ephesus, so it was in Asia Minor. An unwavering, habit-of-life trust in Christ could enable the true believers amongst John’s readership to stand strong against the anti-Christian attacks in their assemblies (1 John 2:18).

¹³ Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2005), [CD-Rom].

¹⁴ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

Believers are saved by faith (Ephesians 2:8), but they are sanctified and strengthened by it as well. The Bible says, “The righteous will live by faith” (Romans 1:17). Victory over sin and Satan is available to every Spirit-inhabited believer. All that is required for the experience of victory is faith — trust in Jesus, His truth, and His gospel. When the eyes of faith are firmly fixed on Him, the enticements and deceptions of fallen society will wilt. By His Spirit, Jesus gives power to overcome. One only needs to learn to rely on that Spirit for strength. Faith, however, is not a flimsy thing, and emotive thing, or a purely subjective thing. It has the realities of God as its object. One has said, “The ground of our victory is Christ’s death and resurrection. From that work believers will have victory over all that is in opposition to God. Daily victory is also granted to the individual believer, but he must exercise faith in Christ and be active in his pursuit of God.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Akin, 193.