

LOVING GOD

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
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No. 6: Summer of Love
Scripture: 1 John 5

Last Monday I went fly fishing with two guys in my small group Bible study. They were regularly pulling trout out of the stream but I was not catching anything.

Finally one of them pointed out, "John, you are fishing in the wrong place. The fish are in the river, not up in the trees." It was true. My flies spent most of the time attached to branches of bushes and trees. I was rather hurt by their criticism and told them I was after flying fish. They were not impressed.

Today we are going fishing in 1 John chapter 5.

We are after the big one.

We want help with our church mission statement.

You remember this is **Loving God and Serving People.**

So please turn to First John chapter 5 in your Bible and take out your message outline as we look at the grand theme of **Loving God**. It is hard to imagine anything more important.

John begins by describing the **PRACTICE OF LOVING GOD**. (v 1-5)
In the musical *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle says with exasperation to the man who is trying to win her heart,
"Don't talk of love, show me." It is easy to talk of loving God but it means little unless it is put into practice.
John gives us three ways we show our love for God.

The first is **TRUST**.

We express this trust when we believe and so John declares, **"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." (v 1)**

The core belief of Christianity is that, "Jesus is the Christ." He is the Messiah. He is the Savior.

This weekend there is a discussion in *The Post-Bulletin* about CareFest.

Some Jews and Mormons were hurt that they could not participate. But CareFest was started as an outreach for Christians who believe that Jesus Christ is God and that there is no salvation except through him. Everyone is welcome who affirms those great truths.

John explains that this trust in God transforms us. **“Everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands.” (v 1-2)**

When we trust God we become part of a new family.
We receive the love of the father.
In turn we will love his son, Jesus Christ.
He will help us to love others.

I once heard Gladys Aylward tell her life story. She was an English servant girl who felt called to be a missionary in China. The mission agencies refused to sponsor her due to her lack of education. So she saved up her meager wages and in 1930 during the height of the depression set out alone to China on the Trans Siberian Railway.



In China she found work running an Inn for mule drivers. After the death of the inn manager the government informed Gladys that funding for the inn would be cut off because of her lack of experience. She was broke and she had no sponsors. No one would give her credit and everybody wanted her to leave. One official told her, “This isn’t your country. You are white. You shouldn’t be China at all.” They urged her to go back to England where she belonged. Gladys told them, “God wants me in China. That’s where I belong.” She had every reason to hate the people after the way she had been treated but she trusted God who gave her a loving concern for them and so she stayed.

Because she stayed God used Gladys to lead the Mandarin Governor to Christ. And when the Japanese army attacked China in 1940 she heroically led over 100 orphan children to safety through the mountains to avoid the enemy soldiers.

That sort of love in the face of hatred even makes Hollywood sit up and take notice.

So a film was made of her story. It was called "The Inn of the Sixth Happiness" starring Ingrid Bergman.

Second, says John, we practice love through our **OBEDIENCE**.

**"This is love for God: to obey his commands.
And his commands are not burdensome." (v 3)**

To profess love for God but to fail to obey his commands is nonsense. It shows that we really think his commands are a bore and a chore. But God's commands are not burdensome they are a blessing. They are meant for our good. They liberate us to enjoy life.

You may be facing a decision this week that involves obeying God or disobeying him. In presenting that choice to you Jesus is really asking, "Do you love me?"

Then says John we show our love for God by being **VICTORIOUS**.

"For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith." (v 4)

When we love God we trust him and obey him.
This results in victory over temptation and our circumstances.

Let me show you how this works in practice.

Some years ago our family visited the Hanoi Hilton in Vietnam. This was the prisoner of war camp where American POWs were held during the Vietnam War.



Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest ranking United States Military Officer in

the Hanoi Hilton.

He was tortured over 20 times during his 8 years of imprisonment.

Stockdale lived out the war without any prisoner's rights, no set release date, and no certainty as to whether he would ever survive to see his family again. He shouldered the burden of command doing everything he could to create conditions that would increase the number of prisoners who would survive unbroken.



At one point he beat himself with a stool and cut himself with a razor deliberately disfiguring himself so he could not be put on film as an example of a well treated prisoner. He exchanged secret intelligence information with his wife through his letters knowing that discovery would mean more torture and perhaps death.

A reporter asked him how he managed to keep going. He replied, "I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted, that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into a defining event of my life which in retrospect I would not trade."

And so as Christians, we are victorious because we do not lose faith in the end of the story.

We know that Jesus was victorious on the cross and that one day he is coming to put everything right.

It is because of the victory of Jesus that we can endure every challenge we face in life.

He gives us the ability to handle the most severe losses. He makes us victorious even when we lose our investments or we lose our job or we lose our marriage or we lose our health or we lose a loved one.

With his help we can still hold our head high even when we have unjustly lost our reputation or lost our home or lost our dream.

This is a faith that is personal because it is rooted in Christ. It is practical because it helps us help face disaster and it is possible because millions of people around the world are living it right now.

All that is fairly straight forward but now John changes tack. This next section from verses 6-12 is anything but straight forward and so the temptation is to pass over it. But it rewards careful examination.



Perhaps I can explain it with a story. Last week my children found this little dog wandering in the street. She was clearly lost so they brought her home. Since then we have been trying to find her owner without success. There have been many cries from my offspring, "Dad can we keep her?" And I would be open to that idea if they weren't all leaving in September.

John is writing to people who are feeling lost. They have gone through a church split because of a group called the Gnostics. John wants to assure them that they belong to God who has found them.

So this next section is about **THE CONFIRMATION OF GOD'S LOVE.**
(v 6-12)

John is providing us with four more proofs that our faith is real.

The first is **THE TESTIMONY OF WATER AND BLOOD.**

John writes, **"This is the one who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood . . . for there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood."**

Now what on earth is this testimony of water and blood? What comes to your mind when you think of these words water and blood in relation to the life of Jesus?

The honest answer is we are not sure.

The term "water and blood" clearly meant something specific to John's readers but we are too far from the event to know what it was.

All sorts of wild explanations have been made but I think the best one was proposed by Tertullian.

He said, "The water refers to Jesus' baptism and the blood refers to his death."

This seems the most logical interpretation because in a very real sense Jesus did come to us at his baptism when he was commissioned by God and through his death when he brought us salvation.

In other words the baptism and death of Jesus are the boundaries of his earthly ministry.

At each of these events God intervened in a miraculous way to bear testimony to his son.

John's point is that we know God loves us because our faith is grounded in historical reality not in myth.

Jesus Christ lived and died so that we might be found.

John observed it and so bears testimony to it.

Second there is **THE TESTIMONY OF THE SPIRIT.**

"It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth." (v 6)

John is acknowledging that behind his own words is the witness of the Holy Spirit who is directing him as he writes this letter. That is why we can believe it is true.

Then there is **THE TESTIMONY OF GOD HIMSELF.**

"We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son . . . anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son." (v 9-10)

How do we know that our faith in Christ is genuine and not simply self delusion? Because God says so.

He is a reliable witness.

There are two reasons why God's divine testimony should be believed. First, because it is greater than human testimony which we accept and second, because to refuse to believe God's testimony is sin.

We accept the testimony of human beings every day. When we go into a restaurant to eat we accept the word of the waiter that the food is not poisoned.

When we get on a plane we accept the words of the pilot that it is safe to fly. We couldn't live without accepting the testimony of other human beings. Well then says John why shouldn't we believe God whose word is absolutely trustworthy.

Then we can be confident of God's love because of

THE TESTIMONY OF OUR HEARTS.

"Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart." (v 10)

There is the inner witness of our heart to the truth of the Christian gospel. We feel it to be right.

God has made us with a connection between head and heart so that when one is touched it impacts the other.

Jonathan Edwards wrote a book on this subject called "The Religious Affections." He said, "The supernatural power of the gospel transforms our feelings about God."

If this was the only evidence it would leave the Christian faith highly subjective.

But John has already outlined the historical evidence.

The Christian faith is based on truth but that truth is so powerful it results in a transformation that we can experience in our soul.

Some theologians want to make that inner experience the only evidence.

They say it doesn't really matter whether Jesus rose from the dead or not as long as you have personally experienced it in your heart.

But that is nonsense. You can't experience a truth that didn't happen. That is self delusion.

John concludes his letter by describing **THE REWARDS OF LOVING GOD.**
(v 13-21)

Now we do not love God for what we can get out of it.

We love God in response to his love for us.

But the truth is that genuine love is wonderfully rewarding and John lists several rewards that are staggering in their scope.

The first reward is that **WE WILL LIVE FOREVER.**

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." (v 13)

Eternal life means the life of the world to come.

It is the present possession of every Christian.

This life must be experienced now or it will not be experienced later. If Jesus is not our Savior now he cannot save when we stand before God.

As Augustine said, "No one has life unless they have Christ."

So the vital question is, "Do we have Christ now?"

The second reward is that **WE CAN APPROACH GOD.**

"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him." (v 14-15)

How marvelous that we can have confidence in approaching the creator of the universe.

This word confidence means boldness to speak freely.

Our conversation with God can be uninhibited for we are children of a loving Heavenly Father.

This verse gives us a helpful understanding of the purpose of prayer. Notice what this promise says.

It is not that we can ask anything, because we may ask wrongly and selfishly. Rather we can ask anything that is according to God's will.

How do we know God's will?

A good place to start is the Bible which is the revelation of God's will. As we pray scripturally directed prayers we know that God will hear and answer us.

Some people think of prayer as the way we change God's mind but John shows us that prayer is not so much getting God to pay attention to our request as it is getting our requests in line with God's perfect will for us. That is why in prayer we need to listen as well as speak. The Christian mystics call this listening prayer.

John suggests that when we pray we need to think of others particularly those in spiritual need.

"If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life." (v 16)

When we look around at our family and friends we see that some have got themselves into spiritual difficulties. They may be openly rebellious towards God or immersed into some sin.

What should we do?

We are to pray for them knowing that God desires that none should perish but that all should come to repentance and live.

We naturally pray for those who are physically ill.

We should as naturally pray for those who are spiritually unwell for we can pray for the health of our soul as well as the health of our body.

We see that John envisions a church where members love, encourage and warn one another.

That doesn't take place in a church service but in a small group and that is why we encourage you to be part of one.

However, there is a puzzling statement here when John goes on to say, **"I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that." (v 16)**

Now what is this sin that leads to death?

Apparently in John's day the phrase was a common one and was well understood for John does not bother to explain it. But today the key has been lost and so we have to search for John's meaning.

It appears that John is referring to apostasy. He is talking about those who left the church because they did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. They are the antichrists who John says, **"Went out from us but did not really belong to us." (1 John 2:18-23)**

However, we cannot identify exactly what this sin is that leads to death. Yet we can grasp the central truth. John is telling us to be concerned about the spiritual welfare of our brothers and sisters.

For we are our brother's keeper. We are to encourage one another to live a holy life. When we see a brother slipping we are to pray for them and do everything in our power to restore them.

The third reward of loving God is that **WE ARE CHANGED.** John writes, **We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who is born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him." (v 18)**

When a person becomes a Christian there will be a change in their behavior. This is God's guarantee. He is a holy God and when he takes up residence in our life he brings about a transformation. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say that, "Faith always shows itself in the whole personality.

We no longer "Continue to sin."
This does not mean we stop sinning all together. John has already said in the first chapter, **"If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8)** But we will not continue to habitually sin. The reason for this is that Jesus keeps us safe. We now belong to him and he takes care of his property. He will not let the evil one harm us.

The fourth reward of loving God is that **WE GRASP SPIRITUAL REALITY.**

John says, **"We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one." (v 19)**

Some think that this world is all there is. Reality is defined by what we can experience with our senses.

The Christian realizes that the physical world is just part of the picture.

There is a spiritual world in parallel with this one and the actions that are taking place in that spiritual realm have an impact on this physical world.



There is a real world of angels and demons and God and Satan. Occasionally human beings are given the ability to see into that spiritual world. John himself had that opportunity at the top of the Mount of Transfiguration when he saw Jesus with Moses and Elijah.

John also saw into the spiritual world on the Island of Patmos when he was given his revelation.

This ability to grasp spiritual reality helps us to understand our world. We discover like Elisha's servant that we are not alone.

Do you remember that story in Second Kings where the King of Aram has surrounded the city?

The servant was terrified as he looked out the window at all the enemy soldiers.

But Elisha said, **"Don't be afraid, those who are with us are more than those who are with them." (2 Kings 6:16)**



The servant didn't know what Elisha was talking about so Elisha asked God to open the young man's eyes and the servant saw they were protected by a vast angelic army.

Our lives are not ruled by accidents or coincidences but by divine providence. It is true the world is under the control of the evil one but it is also true we are the children of God and that Jesus has said, **"I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)**

This is why we must not cut ourselves off from the world. Jesus has commissioned us to go into the world, not to withdraw from it. We are not to

have an attitude of indifference or separation from the world but one of engagement and compassion like Jesus himself.

Another reward of loving God is that **WE KNOW THE TRUTH.**

John writes, **"We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true – even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life."** (v 20)

This is a summary of John's entire letter.

Jesus has brought us into the closest possible union with the one true God. By faith we enter into a relationship that will never end. We are in God and he in us.

God shares with us his own indestructible life, the life of the eternal.

This truth tells us we are in a battle and so John ends on a note of warning, **"Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."** (v 21)

Ephesus, where John lived, was full of idols.

It was a city of astrology, sorcery and black magic.

At the center was the Temple of Diana, one of the wonders of the ancient world.

Its religious rituals involved unspeakable immorality.



John pleads with us to keep from idols.

An idol is anything which occupies the place of God. Success can be an idol, popularity can be an idol, materialism is an idol.

Our body image can be an idol.

Good things can be idols if they keep us from knowing God. Anything that squeezes God out from the central position towards the margins of our lives is an idol that must be removed.

We have only been given one life.

This is not a dress rehearsal. It is the real thing.

We must not squander it. When we love God he shows us the truth. He tells us what things we should pursue and what has eternal value.

But sometimes words are not enough. We need to see this kind of love for God fleshed out in a life.

Thankfully there are many examples for us to follow.

Such a person was Jennings Johnson.
His funeral was held here Friday.
Jennings made a tremendous contribution to our
community.
He served this church for 60 years.
But the most important thing about him was that he
loved God and the truth of God.
So he lived well and he died well.
He is in Christ's presence now because of his faith in
the Son of God.
He is one of that cloud of witnesses that point us to Jesus.

