

Water and Blood, Spirit and Victory

Revelation 12:7-11; 1 John 4:21-5:12

So...we are now in the last two weeks of our journey through John's first letter to the early believers, an old man, the last standing apostle, trying to pass the gospel torch to a new generation of Christians, all this decades and decades after John had heard and seen and touched and held Jesus way back in Galilee when John was young. So this will be the last turn of the corkscrew logic that John has been working, verse after verse, chapter after chapter, throughout his letter.

With each turn of the corkscrew, John has touched on the same points, respect and obedience for the commandments, love for the brothers and sisters, openness to the anointing of the Spirit, openness to our need for the forgiveness for which Jesus shed his blood. Each time, every time John has turned the corkscrew we have looked at all these gospel truths from a somewhat different angle. And he starts today by reminding us that all the commandments that set the many boundaries and pathways God calls us to observe in life are driven by just two guiding principles.

So John tells us, "*...this commandment we have from Christ: he who loves God must also love his brother.*" The point being that what sets God's commandments into motion, weekly worship, generous giving, sacrificial service, heartfelt prayer, learning and teaching God's word, fidelity to marriage and family, what drives those disciplines and what keeps us from what God forbids, greed, rage, lust, covetousness... the driving force behind all the many commandments is love for God and love for the people around us.

All the commandments find their origin in the love God holds for us as our Father. John writes, "*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves a child who has been born of him.*" What John's saying is that the things we know about God and faith, the vows, and creeds and covenants, the gospel facts about Jesus, the things we know are way more than just an exercise for the mind. To really take those facts to heart, to really live as if Jesus were the Christ requires that the Father work in our hearts a sort of rebirth, it is the love of God that sets us on a path toward belonging to and resembling him.

Before now, John had been telling us that the way to get close to God is to love the people he's placed around us at church. John told us last week that no one gets closer to God than they are to the brothers and sisters at church. But here John reverses the logic. Here John teaches us that the

love we show each other hinges on the sort of love we feel and express for the Father in worship and on our obedience to how he commands us to live.

John writes, *“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God that we keep his commandments.”* Now, to modern ears, this might sound counter-intuitive. Our stereotype of religious people who worry about keeping commandments is that all that piety tends to make them cold, wall them off, close their hearts and minds to the wants and needs and dreams of the people around them. And we think that because we’re worldly. We’ve lived too long in a society that craves choice and informality and spontaneity.

I think that, against every modern instinct, it is rules and boundaries, obligation and accountability, discipline and structure and schedule that actually free our hearts to trust and love and forgive and work with each other. And cultivating that starts with the Almighty. A person who won’t let God set the rules as God sees fit, who won’t be bound by what the Scriptures actually say will still have rules, but guess who’ll be setting them. Us, people like me and you! And when all of life becomes a function of what we think, the pressure on us to be right increases to a point where we can’t afford to be wrong. And for that reason, my experience with free spirits is that they are not forgiving, not particularly flexible, not particularly kind. They lack the humility and softness of heart that believers learn in our struggle to keep God’s commandments. So John writes about God, *“...his commandments are not burdensome.”*

He doesn’t mean that keeping commandments is easy, he means that the commandments open our hearts and minds to God in a way that ultimately leads to love. Because engaging with God and learning holiness teaches us a humility that frees us to entertain the possibility that we may not know everything. The commandments lead us into a moral, spiritual struggle with our own native sin that puts us in a place where we can feel for other people in their struggles, where we can offer them the forgiveness that we’ve needed from God over and over again.

And best of all, as we struggle toward God and away from sin together, we win.

John writes, *“...everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world...Who is it that overcomes the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”* So the commandments are necessary, we can learn humility and compassion and flexibility from the commandments, to the extent we remember that the point of the exercise is for us to love and know and trust and lean on Jesus Christ. Paul teaches over and over again in his letters that commandments without a Savior are a dead end at best and toxic at worst.

So at the center of John’s corkscrew logic is the Savior, he writes about Jesus, *“This is he who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ; not by water alone but by the water and the blood. And*

the Spirit is the one who testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.” So this three strand cord, water, blood and Spirit had worked its way into John’s thinking way back when John was young and Jesus was there to seen and heard and touched. John records in his gospel that one dark night a rabbi, Nicodemus, showed up at Jesus’s door. Now Nicodemus had wrestled down the commandments to the point where he could imagine himself a success.

But the struggle had softened his heart to a point where Nicodemus knew that Jesus had something more, something Nicodemus needed. “It’s no good.” Jesus told him in so many words, “...*unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*” Jesus would go on to teach the Spirit as a wild card God sends to move us like leaves in the wind where God wants us to go.

And the point of Jesus’ words was that no one belongs to God without opening his or her heart to the Spirit and making a new beginning, being born again or born from above. But Jesus didn’t explain what it was to be born of water. But it’s clear to me that what he’s teaching is the baptism that John the Baptist had called all Israel to come and do in advance of Jesus taking center stage. And the point of baptism to a Jewish mind was a ritual wash. Israelites immersed themselves in water when some event or condition had made them unclean, unfit to be among God’s people.

I think the point is baptism because in John 3 the next person on stage with Jesus after Nicodemus is John the Baptist himself. But the Baptist wasn’t popular with the crowd that imagined themselves a success with the commandments. People like Nicodemus saw no point in acting like guilty converts, when in their own minds they were leading the parade toward God. John taught that the parade was lost, and Jesus told Nicodemus was that John was right, that Nicodemus needed to get down to the Jordan and make his repentance along with the riff raff and the street people.

So Spirit and water and blood all swirl around each other in Jesus’ teaching as John remembered it. And what it all meant was painfully brought home for John at the crucifixion as John held Jesus’ mother through the moments of Jesus’ death. And after Jesus died, John writes this, “...*one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw this has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows he’s telling the truth – that you also might believe.*” Which seems like an awfully formal thing to say about an effusion of body fluids from Jesus’ chest.

But water and Spirit and blood had been so prominent in Jesus’ teaching that, I think, John took the water and the blood he saw at the cross as confirmation that Jesus was the Savior toward which John’s baptism pointed, Jesus was the sacrifice whose blood could cleanse the sin we

struggle with as God's Spirit teaches us the language of commandments and holiness and purity, honesty and truth.

Decades later, John would write to a new generation of Christians who never seen the Baptist at the Jordan, who hadn't seen Jesus bleed on a cross, and he remembered the awe he felt at the sight and sound of Jesus what said and did and he wrote to them, "...*there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and blood; and these three are as one.*" The younger Christians might have said, as I'm sure some of you might be thinking now, who cares? Spirit and water and blood.

What does it have to do with us? Well, our souls depend on it so I'll give it one more shot before we move on toward Thanksgiving. God the Spirit is that wind who will move our hearts to think and feel and live as if God is real. Without the Spirit in our hearts, church becomes a half-hearted club, the gospel becomes a patchwork of disconnected slogans and ideals. It is the Spirit in our hearts who teaches us a walk with God that is dynamic and real and personal...and true. John writes us, "...*the Spirit is the one who testifies and the Spirit is truth.*"

I share with Nicodemus the burden of having Reverend in front of my name. It is a title that suggests that I may know something or be something closer to God than other ordinary mortals. But reverends have to struggle with sin and commandments and overcome the world just like any other believer. And without the Spirit in play, the temptation would be to keep the title and become a phony. So what Jesus wants Nicodemus and me and you to understand is that the Spirit will not allow us to con ourselves or each other. He not only knows the truth, he is the truth and he lives in our hearts, once you and I have thrown in with Christ.

To be genuine in the kingdom of God, we must allow the Spirit time and place to teach us the holiness that the gospel both commands and promises to everyone who throws in with Jesus. Christ didn't come here to make us happy and successful, he came here to make us holy, and the Spirit won't settle for anything less. Which means that you and I both will find ourselves driven by the Spirit to the Jordan for the cleansing we need to keep working with a holy God.

Not necessarily a river, not necessarily with water more than once. But the exercise of going to God and telling the truth about what we've done and who we are and wanting to change our ways is an absolutely necessary part of belonging to Christ. The Spirit will drive us to the water metaphorically speaking and we will need to confess and turn from our sins, usually just with God but occasionally with each other, in one another's company, just like was with John at the Jordan.

Which brings us to the blood. Truthfulness and repentance, joining Nicodemus at the Jordan with the riff raff gets us to a place where God can show us mercy. But God's hatred for sin, for

greed and rage and lust and rebellion and deceit and selfishness, his hatred for these things would make mercy impossible were it not that the Father and Son and Spirit joined forces in a plan that sent Jesus to the cross to satisfy God's justice against all the corrupt and cruel and selfish and deceitful and foolish things we've done.

The blood Jesus shed, the suffering and sorrow and shame he endured is what makes honesty and repentance a survivable experience for you and me. Jesus was confronted an angry Judge on the cross so that you and I could be met by a compassionate Father, if only we'll turn from sin and throw in with Jesus. It is then that God becomes our Father, both to encourage and to discipline us as his children, it is then that the Spirit sets up in our hearts and moves us to keep faith Christ and gospel, family and church. It is then that we become brothers and sisters learning the art of love and holiness together.