

1 John 5:1-12
(Ezekiel 36:25-27; John 1:29-34)
“The Test and the Testimony”

Introduction

John wrote this letter to those who believe in Jesus Christ, so that they may know that they have eternal life (5:13). As we approach the end of this letter, we find John summing up, combining all three vital signs of spiritual health, in order to show us that they flow logically from one another, as crucial evidences of the new life given us in Christ, a life that is no longer in bondage to this world and its values.

He then sets out to answer the question you may ask yourself from time to time: How can I know that any of this is true? Why should I believe that Jesus is the Christ, that he has taken upon himself the consequences of my sin and united me to himself? In a sense the entire letter has offered one side – the personal, human, experiential side – of the answer. When we begin to see our lives transformed as the Scripture has promised, it is a powerful evidence of the truth of the gospel and is a faith-building experience. But what am I to do in those difficult times when I doubt the reality of what I’ve thought, felt and seen, and when I wonder if there is any basis to believe the gospel of Christ?

What John does in verses six through twelve is to return to the theme with which he opened the letter:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us (1:1-3).

In other words, John opened the letter by saying,

I know what I am talking about. I was there. I was part of the story. I saw Jesus, and from his baptism until his crucifixion, I was one of his closest friends and followers. I have seen him, heard him and touched him. I saw him dead, and after that, I saw him alive again. I am writing so that you may know him, too, and in knowing him and trusting him have the same eternal life that I have received and that is his alone to give.

So John gives us, not only a summary of the three-fold test, but he adds to it now a three-fold witness that God the Father has given to the world concerning his Son. And all of this is so that we may know that we are his and have eternal life.

Body

1. How do I know that I am God's child? The three-fold test (5:1-5):

The doctrinal test:

There is a truth to be believed, a truth so central that, when it is truly believed, it changes everything we think about life's meaning and significance, about success and failure, about the past, present and future, about life and death. That truth is that Jesus is the Christ, the one who shows us who God is and who are meant to be, the one who came to redeem us from bondage to sin and death, to rescue us from bondage to the values of this present age, and to give us a new beginning in him, new affections, desires and abilities, through his Spirit, and a new destiny as children of God.

Those who believe this truth have already been born of God, and so do not merely give assent to a doctrine, but rather begin to reorganize their lives around this central truth of the gospel of Christ. It changes how we relate to others, what we permit ourselves to decide and plan and desire. If real, it should first manifest itself relationally.

The relational test:

John has just, in the verses we studied last week, given us his most eloquent exposition of the relational test, of the crucial importance of loving one another. Here, he simply reminds us that love for God is manifested by love for others, and love for others is manifested and proven out in our love for God.

Because we believe in Jesus and because his Spirit is now alive within us, we begin to relate to others the way that Jesus related to others. John is quite clear in telling us that, if we do not love other people well, especially those who are closest to us, then we have no grounds for believing that we love God and are his children. Imagine how we would turn our culture upside down if just a few of those who profess to be Christians loved their families and neighbors, those they work alongside and see socially, with the kind of intentional, self-sacrificial love with which Christ loved us.

The ethical test:

If we love God and love others, then we find that we are keeping God's law without, perhaps, ever really thinking about it. Why? Because God's law, his commandments, are simply a series of pictures of what it looks like to love God and to love one another. That is why John says, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not

burdensome” (5:3). If you truly believe that Jesus is the Christ and that, therefore, his ways lead to life and joy and peace, and if you are learning to love other people well, then you will rejoice in keeping God’s commandments and grieve when you break them, because your desires are being conformed, and with them your character, to be ever more like Jesus.

The key to overcoming the world:

John sums up this first section by repeating three times the promise that this kind of living, vibrant, faith in Christ is what enables us to overcome the world in its brokenness and rebellion against the Lord of life. Truly believing in and entrusting oneself to Jesus as God’s Son is the key: “Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God” (5:5).

2. Why should I believe the gospel of Christ? The three-fold testimony (5:6-12):

There are those who understand the words “water and blood” to mean the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Others understand them to signify the water and blood that flowed from Jesus’ side when a soldier pierced him with a sword to see if he was dead (John 19:34). But neither of those, I think, gets at what John is saying here, because he is focusing on how the Father bore witness to the Son to show that he was indeed the Christ.

I agree with most scholars that the clearest explanation, especially when taken in context, is that “water” refers to Jesus’ baptism and “blood” to his cross.

[A note for those who are interested: According to the church fathers, the particular form of Gnosticism that John was addressing in this letter involved a denial that Jesus was actually the Christ. It taught that Jesus was an ordinary man until his baptism, when the Spirit of Christ came upon him, and that the Spirit then left him before his crucifixion. John, who knew Jesus and who understood something of Jesus’ own self-understanding, contends that Jesus was and is eternally God’s Son, the Christ, prior to his baptism (see John 1:1f) as well as after the cross, and forever.]

The water:

By the cryptic use of the word, “water,” John refers to God’s first public witness to his Son, Jesus’ baptism, where the Father’s voice declared, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16-17). John, who seems to have previously been a disciple of John the Baptist and who may well have been present at Jesus’ baptism, remembered, not only the Father’s words, but the words of John the Baptist, “Behold, the Lamb of God

who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Thus, at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, the Father announced and the forerunner announced, that Jesus was the one whom God had promised as Redeemer.

The blood:

And, by the word, “blood,” John reminds us of the culmination of his ministry, when on the cross he bore our sins and carried our sorrows, and triumphed over them in his death and subsequent victory. There the justice and mercy of God were vindicated, and the power of everything that would separate us from God was broken. As the earth shook and the sky was darkened, even a Roman centurion testified, “Truly, this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:54).

The Spirit:

The witness who continues to bear the father’s witness to the Son is the Spirit, whom Jesus promised to those who loved him:

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. ... The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (John 14:22-26).

It is the Spirit who brings us all of the benefits of Jesus’ life, death and victory. It is the Spirit who convicts us of sin and who gives us a desire for new life and then who brings us that new life. The Spirit enables us to believe the witness borne by the water and the blood.

The key to having eternal life:

And so, again, John sums up by calling us to believe in Jesus. Truly believing in and entrusting oneself to Jesus as God’s Son is the only proper response to his Father’s testimony. “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (5:12).

Conclusion

The next verse states the letter’s theme: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13). I end this morning simply by asking you, do you know that you have eternal life? Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ? Do you love others as Christ has loved you? Do you long to keep God’s commands? Have you yet been born of God? The day will come for each of us when nothing else will matter.

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