

Sermon 45, The Marks of Regeneration, 1 John 5:1-5

Proposition: The truly born-again Christian believes in Jesus, loves God as Father, other Christians as brothers, obeys God's commands, and conquers the world.

- I. Believing in Jesus as Messiah, v. 1a
- II. Loving God As Father, v. 1b
- III. Loving God's Children, v. 1c
- IV. Obeying God's Commands, Not as a Burden but as a Joy vv. 2-3
- V. Conquering the World, vv. 4-5
- VI. Believing in Jesus as the Son of God, v. 5

Introduction

What is a Christian? We would all claim to be one. But how can you identify a Christian? In the passage before us, John lists half a dozen characteristics. Any one of these is sufficient to make you a Christian — but none of them is believable without all of them. In fact, none of them is real without all of them. If you love God as your Father, you are a Christian. But you can't do that without loving His children, overcoming the world, and believing in His Son. And so on. John is at pains not only to list these marks of the Christian, but to tell us that they go together. You have to have them all. They're not works that save; they are the works of the saved. Someone God has rescued from sin does all six of these things. If you haven't been rescued from sin, you can't do a single one of them. If you have been rescued, you'll do them all. So let's talk about these marks of a Christian.

I. Believing in Jesus as Messiah, v. 1a

The first mark of a Christian is to believe in Jesus. Everyone who is born-again believes in Him. But what does it mean to believe in Jesus? It means to embrace a specific truth about Him. It means more than that, but John emphasizes a particular truth about Jesus here. That truth is that He is the Anointed One. A Christian has faith that the historical man Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in the early days of the Roman Empire in the province of Palestine, was anointed by God for the purpose of saving the world.

That's a tall claim. But that's an enormous and necessary part of what it means to believe. It means taking what we know from history about a Galilean carpenter and merging it with the religious claim that in actual fact and historical time God took this carpenter and chose Him to save the world.

Do you believe that? Put another way: If it could be shown from history that Jesus never existed, would your faith fall apart? If not, then you don't believe in the Christian message. The Bible is a history book. If it is merely metaphorical, it falls apart. The truly born-again acknowledge the historicity of what's written in these pages. They believe that Jesus was

anointed by God to save the world — and that He is accomplishing that purpose right up to the present day.

II. Loving God As Father, v. 1b

But the born-again Christian does more than believe in Jesus, as important as that is. He also loves God as Father. Now, most of the human race has some kind of concept of the transcendent. All of us have a bent toward conceiving of the universe in personal terms. We threaten, we cajole, we rage, we thank — what? Some say “God,” some say “force,” some say “karma” or “the universe” or “the cosmos.” But all human beings have cried out in prayer, whether they believed in a listening, living God or not.

The Christian claim goes farther than recognizing the universality of prayer defined as speaking to the universe as though it could actually hear. We don’t just say “the transcendent,” “the numinous,” “the beyond.” We say “God”; indeed, we say “Father.” In other words, we address the higher power as personal and personally related to us in the most enduring relationship known to the human race: parenthood. We don’t love the numinous or the beyond; we love the Father and regard Him as the one who created us and gave us spiritual new birth. We are born again. How? Because we have been begotten anew by a loving Father.

Do you love God not only as God, but specifically as Father? Do you address Him as Father? Do you think of Him as Father? Are you just as eager to ask Him for help as you are to ask your earthly father for help? Do you have as much confidence in His care for you as in your earthly father’s care? Brothers and sisters, everyone who is truly born-again loves God as Father.

III. Loving God’s Children, v. 1c

The other side of loving God as Father is loving His children. We talked about this at length last week. I met a mom once who told me how much she enjoyed her neighbors. She went riding with them all the time and counted them good friends. But one day the neighbor’s dog snarled at her little child. She asked that the dog be restrained, and her neighbors were very offended that she would question their wonderful pooch. The friendship has never recovered since, because that mom instinctively believed that whoever loves the begetter loves the begotten. When she saw that lack of concern for her kids, she concluded that the neighbor cared for her less than she thought. Do you love the children of God? Are you willing to tie up your dog for the sake of a church friend? Are you willing to silence your music, keep your political opinions quiet, and stop dumping all your problems on others for the sake of the body? Do you positively enjoy being with your fellow saints? If you love God the Father, you will love all of His children.

IV. Obeying God’s Commands, Not as a Burden but as a Joy vv. 2-3

The fourth mark of a Christian is this one, maybe the trickiest of them all. The Christian obeys God’s commands. Someone who has no other gods, doesn’t worship graven images, keeps God’s name and Sabbath holy, honors his parents, and so on is a Christian! Now, again, we all know that there are plenty of moral unbelievers out there. Are they really Christians? No! John gives this searching test: The Christian does not find God’s commands burdensome. They are not

grievous, not onerous, not painful. The Christian doesn't feel like he's giving anything up when he obeys God!

Now, I think all of us know that feeling. It's a good feeling. It's the feeling of freely obeying and enjoying our obedience because we are enjoying God. But all of us know its opposite, too. We know the feeling that says "Obeying God right now would be hard and stupid. Disobeying is so much more fun and profitable. To obey God would mean giving up the thing I most value. To obey God would mean depriving myself of something I really deserve, some reward or treat or pleasure that I just need."

Well, listen: To feel that all the time is to not be a Christian. To feel that God has no right to command you, and that when He does command you He is getting out of His lane, is to be a non-Christian. That's how those who have never been born again feel. That's the pain they carry around in their heart. It is the pain of rebellion, the feeling that God should not and must not try to tell ME what to do because He has no right to get into my business.

Every Christian is tempted to feel the commandments are burdensome. But we don't have to feel that way. In fact, John tells us that the mark of the Christian is that he doesn't find the commandments burdensome. I enjoy protecting life. I enjoy telling the truth, even when it gets me in trouble. I enjoy sticking chastely to my wife. Can you say those things? By the grace of God, I hope you can. But I'm going to talk for a moment about what oftentimes seems to be the thorniest of the Ten, and indeed is the one far and away most likely to be dismissed as non-binding, a mere suggestion that ceased to be relevant millenia ago.

That commandment is the fourth commandment: Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Do you find this commandment a burden? Do you feel like God has stolen part of your time from you? I would love to get a show of hands just now. How many of you believe that this commandment applies to you and how you spend every Sunday? Of those who don't believe it applies, how many of you would find obeying it burdensome? Of those who do believe it applies, how many find the attempt to obey it to be burdensome? Do you resent giving God a whole day? Do you want to do your housework on His day? Do you want to go to the lake instead of church? Camping instead of worshipping? Listening to your favorite music instead of to God's word with His people?

Let me say this clearly: If the Sabbath commandment burdens you, then you are missing one of these half-dozen marks of the Christian. If the adultery commandment burdens you, and you truly believe that you're better off with porn than without it, you're missing one of the marks of the Christian. If the fifth commandment burdens you, and you don't and won't respect your mother-in-law, you're missing one of the marks of the Christian.

God's commandments are not burdensome. Not in themselves. Not to human nature as created. Only to human beings as fallen, turned away from God, do they come across as burdensome. But when He first loves us, He changes that heart of stone. With our new hearts, we are able to love, which means that we are able to obey, able to assent to God's rightful control over us. Can you truly say that you don't find the commandments burdensome?

V. Conquering the World, vv. 4-5

The penultimate thing the Christian does is to conquer the world. What does this mean? It means overcoming the temptation to regard God's commands as burdensome. The world is, generally speaking, the anti-God system generated by fallen human desire. We conquer it in the sense of not being party to it. We don't live for what the world has to offer us, whether that's prestige or money or pleasure. We live for God, and so we conquer the world. But specifically here, John is talking about the world's resistance to obeying God. That aspect of the world regards God's commands as burdensome. There are all kinds of worldly people who would regard it as hopelessly burdensome to give up porn, to give up raunchy TV, to give up abortion rights and stop coveting and start keeping the Sabbath day holy. They would hate the very attempt. They would hate even being told about it! But when we live as children of God who don't need the corrupt world system for our pleasure, who don't participate in its corruption, who live for what's from the Father rather than for what's from the world, then we overcome the world. The point is not that we tell the world who's boss, that we reform it. Rather, the point is that we bypass it. We leave it to one side, and we press on to Heaven. This is true of everyone who's born again, born of God. Do you need the world? Of course you need the things from the Father, like food and nature and beauty. But if you can't live without the corrupt world system and the things human desire generates, then you are not born of God. You haven't bypassed the world at all. You're right in the thick of it.

VI. Believing in Jesus as the Son of God, v. 5

Well, John ends where he began, with the necessity of faith.

You probably wondered, as we talked about believing that a Galilean carpenter was picked by God for the task of saving the world, why I didn't say anything about that carpenter being fully divine as well as perfectly human. The reason is that John emphasizes Christ's deity here, in v. 5. We have to believe not only that Jesus is the Anointed One, but also that He is the Son of God and therefore that He is God equal with the Father. Do you recognize His Father in Him? Do you see that He too is infinite, eternal and unchangeable God? He is. Oh, He is. Believe, love, trust Him. Live like God's born-again child, and the world will say "See how he loves Him!"

Do you see yourself in these marks of God's child? We have none of them perfectly. But if you are indeed born of God, you have them all truly. I see them in you. Keep loving with the love with which He's loved you. Amen.