

How To Be A Winner

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Date: 20 November 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, we're going to go back for a little while this morning to 1 John chapter 5 and these verses in the first half on page 1023. And we're looking forward before the end of the service to the baptism of forest and amily, that will be always a highlight for us and something important. And baptism for us is something that speaks of very big truths, very significant truths. And we realize and we see and we know that children today are born into guys, there's a bit of ringing coming back in it. It seems to be equine and ringing a little bit. So certainly from my point of view, I don't know if anyone else is hearing that, but children are born into a very uncertain world.

And we recognize that and we do love them very, very much. And part of what we're doing in baptism as Christians is that we are committing them to the certainty and to the promises of God who has changed the individual lives of their parents and of us as believers in the congregation. It's good news that we have. It's good news that we want to share through baptism and also in our worship with any who come to us. And if you're not a Christian here today and you're worshipping with us and you've come along just to watch or to see what goes on, we're so delighted that that's the case and we hope and pray that God will speak to you through His Word and through the truth of His Word. And maybe if you come with struggles and battles and uncertainties which surely we all have today, then we seek to bring comfort from God's Word. And you may wonder the theme of this sermon, the title is How to be a Winner, which seems like a very kind of, maybe a strange thing to say, but I'll come round to why we've got that as the title today.

Because if we just remind ourselves very briefly, if you've been here over the last number of weeks and months, in fact, those of you who have could probably just get up and do this sermon, because you know the book so well, it's a repeated theme that comes up again and again in 1 John. And really, he's speaking to this early church that's struggling and battling with difficulties and with false teaching and with people who want to draw them away from each other and also from Jesus and His truth. And so we recognize that and we see that it's a word, a truth from God, not just for that early church, but also for the church throughout history, because God has inspired that word and brought it to us. So it's God's message as well for us today, which is always important to remember. And if we were to summarize that letter, we'd do it very easily in three words, captured, well, especially if we had taken this passage as well, captured by the love of God, committed to being brothers and sisters in love together as people and then conquerors. Okay, so we've seen that through a repeats again and again, that He wants them by faith to see how much God loves them and how committed He is to them in the giving of His

Son, Jesus Christ. And that's so important for all of us again to be reminded of. And it's the purpose of all we do as a church, as a worshipping body of people, is to be remind each other and encourage one another in the reality and in the truth of Jesus Christ and what He's done, because so often we struggle with that, don't we? We struggle to be captured by His love. It's a battle and it's difficult for us to see it and to live in the light of it. And then to be committed, and John is always moving the next step, he's saying, this is who you are, this is what you have. And he says, now, that's why you love one another as Christians. And he's fighting against this division and the false teaching that's come in and wanted to separate people and all that kind of stuff. And he's saying, you have this new life together through the indepth dwelling spirit. So move towards one another in love and in obedience. And he says that because, and God says that because

He knows it's tough. He knows it's difficult. He knows it's easier not to be directed towards one another. It's easier. We find it easier to be divided and separated in many ways because of our hearts sometimes and because of others and because of us. And then he comes in this passage, if that's kind of the theme throughout being captured and committed, to being conquerors. And that sounds very grand, doesn't it? For an ordinary Sunday morning. And for ordinary people, the call is

to be conquerors. We might feel, well, my life's not really about conquering. It's about surviving. And yet here we have in these very particularly verses four and five, he speaks in the context of being overcomers, being victorious, being conquerors is really what he speaks. That's the language and the word he's using for everyone who has been born of God, overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world, accept the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? So that's the theme of this section about the importance of being a victor. That's why I used that title, how to be a winner. And you may think that's not a very spiritual thing to speak about or a very spiritual way of talking about the Christian life. And yet that's what we spend our lives doing, isn't it? All of us spend our lives seeking to be overcomers, seeking to be victorious, seeking to succeed, seeking at different levels to win battles that we face. We may not use that language, but that's the reality for us, whether it's our battling against our neurosis or our poor self-esteem or our circumstances, whether it's depression or loneliness or our character failings, we want to overcome them.

[6:27] We want to better ourselves and make ourselves victories, victors over addictions and maybe sometimes people's perceptions of us or our rejection by others to be understood, to do our job well. It may be physical illness, exam pressure for some of you, poverty, or just to use a very common phrase, the odds. The odds you feel maybe stacked against you and you're looking for the ability to overcome and the ability to be a victor, the ability to fight for recognition, comfort, justice, happiness, love, whatever it happens to be. That's what in many ways is the things of life that we are facing. And in everyday life, we have shadowy victories, don't we? We have many successes along the way. We have things that boost us up, things that make us feel better, small overcoming moments. And yet for most of us, life is that relentless capacity to knock us back, to knock us off course. And of course, the elephant in the room for us today that nobody speaks about today is the reality that death is the great enemy that none of us can overcome, none of us can have victory over, none of us can deal with in our own strength. And John is simply wanting to remind us that ultimately the victories in life, that even the small victories, even the small things we need to overcome, can't be truly changed and overcome and defeated without the reality of God. And ultimately overcoming death, that last great absurdity that we all face and we all recognize as Christians has this spiritual focus and this spiritual genesis. So the good news of Jesus that we recognize that John repeats again and again and again is that there's a different story, it's a different narrative, it's a transcendent hope, it's the greatest recognition for ourselves is to continually, you're probably saying, oh, not again. But that's what John does, doesn't he?

And he keeps going back to the reality and the power of Jesus. It's the deepest longing we have for our children expressed in the hope and the truth of baptism. And we know that we become overcomers, overcomers in this world through faith and by faith in Jesus Christ. And it's a God-shaped success that is maybe unlike any definition we would give in the world or for the world to understand. So the question just briefly that I want to ask today is, how can I as an average Joe be a conqueror? How is it that in my ordinary everyday life that you might ask that same thing as a Christian, how can it be that we are conquerors, overcomers, successors, victors in this life which seems to knock us back so much? Then there's three things, well maybe four things, quickly, recognizing that the real battle we face is spiritual. I think that's the root of all the obstacles that we face. And John knows that. And John knows where the key to that is in dealing with that. You know, the battles that we face in life have all stemmed from our alienation from God, brought about by sin, all of them. This relentless desire to be independent, to seek to overcome, to battle, to win, to succeed on our own, and rejecting His rightful claim to our worship and to our childlike faith and obedience. Isn't it for us the classic rebellious child syndrome?

This is the example that Jesus uses, the best example in the whole Bible is the prodigal son, isn't it? It's a great example of what we are, despite everything that your parents stand for, the love that they've shown, the commitment and the sacrifice as a rebellious child, they know nothing. They know nothing and we'll succeed without them. We don't need our parents, we're going to go our own way. And we just, we rebel against that and we find ourselves in that place, certainly spiritually, where we're in a pigsty. And the result is a broken world, isn't it? The result is broken hearts and the sentence of death both spiritually and physically. So it's recognizing that battle as a core reality for us all, in an ongoing way as Christians, because that's where, if we recognize the battle, that's where we begin to find the answers, because the answers then is always, and this is for an unbeliever, but it's also for us as believers, as to come to terms with the historical Jesus, the Jesus

that is described in verse 6 here.

This is He who came by water and by blood. It's good that we're talking about water today in baptism, and we've got one later. Jesus Christ, not by the water only, but by the water and the blood, and the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. So you've got this, this, this triune kind of picture of Jesus coming, and it's really a picture of the historical Jesus. He came by water, He came by blood. In other words, when He started His public ministry, He was baptized, and He was baptized, and the Spirit empowered Him to do His ministry. Then He died on the cross, because there is blood as well. And not only is that historic testimony, but there is the truth of the Spirit testifying to these things. So the historical reality of Jesus is always very important to us. In His baptism at the age of 30, He wasn't confessing He was a sinner and His need of baptism. He was saying that He was identifying with the humanity that

He came to save. He was the only person who ever lived who didn't need baptized, who didn't need to be cleansed, who didn't need God's favor, because He was perfect in life, yet took on Himself the identity of sinners of our place in order to set us free, in order to enable us to have eternal life, because the blood and the water speak of His historical reality, and that death and resurrection is where the victory lies. That's where the success lies for us. It's in knowing and understanding this real, recorded historical water and blood person who was in a sealed tomb, but who rose in the third day. It's that great picture again, isn't it, that we need to ask everyone, what do you do with a man who died, claimed to be God, and walked out of the tomb? What do you do with that? What do you do with that? It's either, it's the old story, isn't it? It's either it's just a lie, which John speaks about here, or he's a lunatic, or he's Lord, and we all need to come to terms with that historical reality, and as Christians too, because it's easy for us to forget that. And it's not just the record of the apostles which we have in the Bible, the historical, and the witness of all of these people that's spoken of in the New Testament and in the early history of the church, but it's also the testimony of God. We're told that it's the spirit of truth who testifies to these things. And so the work of Jesus Christ is the self, so we can't prove it, okay? It's the self-attesting claim of God's word. He claims this, and he says, this is what the spirit is claiming, and this is what all of the word points towards, and that's what the prophecies speak of, and that's what God has revealed. It's the truth that He's given us. This is what He's chosen to give us, and that is His testimony. So there's this self-attesting stamp that's given to God's word that comes from God Himself, because He's got no one hired that He can claim, that He can go to for attestation, because He's God. And so it has to be at that level self-attesting, coming to terms with historical Jesus' water and blood in the testimony of the [15:43] Spirit. But then also is the importance and an ongoing way for us of responding to the Spirit of God who testifies to who Jesus is. That means that this, when we come together and worship every time we come, every time you open the word, every time your conscience is struck, it's the living God saying, will you, will you consider this truth, water and the blood?

Will you consider this Christ? And He comes to us, and He comes to us first, and He comes with this great truth. So we have John's classic repetition. We've looked at that, haven't we? Over a number of weeks that John repeats himself again and again and again. So here in this session, four times, four times he says, verse one, everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.

Verse five, who is he that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Christ? Verse ten, whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony of himself. So repetitive. And verse twelve, whoever has the Son as life, whoever does not, the Son does not have life. And there's this relentless repetition of important truth, and he says, it's not just coming to terms with this historical reality and the witness of the Spirit, but it's responding to that.

Your faith can never simply be accepting facts as being true. It's entrusting yourself to the Christ behind these facts. It's recognizing that the Spirit persuades you to believe in Jesus Christ.

[17:21] It's the facts of the gospel plus the influence of another. That's what belief means. It means we take the facts and we are influenced by someone who brings these facts to us. We're moved by them.

And that is exactly what happens. We fuse the water and the blood, the historical reality of Jesus and the Spirit of God together. It's not enough just to accept the facts. We need to respond to God's Spirit and accept and entrust our lives to the one who says, believe in me and you will be saved. Believe in me with all your doubts and fears and struggles and unanswered questions. Just believe this, this resurrected Christ. The rest will come, if not in this life then in eternity.

We need, and we're looking for, you know, that's why we do seven days of prayer as a testimony to our need for the Spirit of God to be cooperating with us in persuading those whom we love, those whom we pray for, those whom we rub shoulders with, also to believe. We entrust, we want them to entrust themselves to Christ as their Lord and Savior as we have done ourselves. We follow, we accept not the facts, but we accept the loving commitment of the living God to have dealt with our alienation from Him before we were even born. This incredible commitment, this incredible patience, this incredible promise that He holds us and never let us go. They will keep us, that what He started He'll finish, that He'll take the bad things and He'll help us to see some reason behind them at some point, that nothing will have victory over us and that will walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death. And He will always allow us to be, in His way, overcomers. It might not look like what we think victory and success looks like, but it will be success and victory, and overcoming His way. And the alternative to that, for all of us in our lives, and I say this guardedly and I say it gently because I know my own heart, but the alternative is that we're calling God a liar. John says that in verse 10, you know, if whoever does not believe God has made Him a liar because He is not believed in the testimony that God has born concerning His Son. So it's not so much that we reject the testimony of the apostles or fellow Christians or other people, but the claim here, John is saying, is that if you reject the truth, if you live even as Christians, as practical atheists, always questioning His goodness and grace, then we're making out God to be a liar. And that's such a serious accusation that John makes here because it is for him.

And he recognized it as such a black and white issue. I think Bob Dylan put it really well in one of his songs when he was, as a Christian passion was strong in his heart and life, he said, you either got faith or you've got unbelief, there ain't no neutral ground. And in many ways, that's the reality. We may feel that we're just, you know, on the fence that we're thinking one way or another. But the reality is that we're, if we choose to reject the living God and question Him and doubt what He Himself testifies to through history and through the apostles and through His Son Jesus, we're making Him out to be a liar. And that's a challenge for us that there's not really neutral ground. We're rebels without His love and grace transforming us and offering us that outstanding rescue. Yes, we need to accept it by faith. And yes, that's a great challenge.

[21 : 33] And yes, there's difficulties along the way. But there can't be that transformation, that change of desires, that hunger after righteousness, a hatred of the destructive powers of sin, no battle in our conscience unless we come and redefine what it means to have faith as it's presented in God's Word. So there's that responding to the Spirit of God. And lastly, the fourth point is then we can know an ex, in an ongoing way. I'm not, I'm saying this, even if you're, and I've been a Christian for a long, long time, I think there can be daily and ongoing newness as we experience and think through who God is and His character again and again. Isn't there, we kind of, we feel like we're born again and can be born as it were, sense that renewal in our lives. When we recognize like John that his love for us is so fundamental and basic, is that agape love which we spoke about before. It makes sense of what he's done and therefore we see his commandments in a new light. We don't see them in the same kind of way, a heavy burdensome way, but we begin to see them as a delight because they are how we find victory and success in our lives. It does turn success upside down. It's not kind of Instagram success, if we can call it that.

It's finding our identity in Jesus on a day-to-day basis. Our Creator is having sorrow over sin and confessing that and just the freedom of knowing your forgiven and guilt doesn't have this great grip on your heart and soul. It's being able to put others, God and others first, which is a total revolution for us and allows us to know victory in all kinds of different ways. It's taking the defeat of the opinions of others and the sense of despair about the planet and the loneliness that we have to the living God and being embraced in his family. It's taking the powerlessness of feeling old and aging and illness and this powerlessness to change and allowing him to renew us so that even old punters are able to say, I'm being renewed day by day. We see that here, don't we? Some of the older people here are just like young whippets. They're just full of energy and they're full of spiritual life. Outwardly they're wasting away. Outwardly we're wasting away, but inwardly they're being renewed day by day. And you young people here, spend some time with these elders, elders, men, women, older people. Get to know them, find out their story, find out how they've experienced God in their lives so much. Don't just think of them as old wrinklies. Just spend time with them and Rick. They have huge experience of life and of grace and you do a great disservice to yourself to ignore them or to only spend time with young people. And old people here spend a lot of time with

the young, share your experiences, embrace them and take them on board because you will show them what victory means in a real way because you've experienced it. I include myself in that aged gap in case you're wondering. And it's so important for us to do that, isn't it? Because we see the inner renewal and as we get older, we see that death isn't the end and death doesn't scare us in the same way and it isn't the kind of the block on all our hopes and dreams, but it's the entry into recognizing the victory and the success of God even more so. So that every fulfillment, the fulfillment of every shadowy victory that we have in this life, every incredible feeling that you have of overcoming adversity, which we've all had in different ways, every success that you've enjoyed is only a shadow of what God wants you to have and know in Him. And it's in all their temporariness what He's offering is permanence in these areas and victories that are massively significant in our ongoing relationships. That's what we want. That's what I want to experience more and more in my Christian life. That's the promise. That's the promise, part of the promise that we will be making and praying over for our covenant children, that they will respond in faith to the privileges that they are being given in being part of a church family, part of a Christian family in their own homes. It's symbolized in baptism and it's all so hugely significant. It's a spiritual act, a sacrament that God initiates and is involved in and is part of today for us.

And I just want to finish by reading some words which I hope makes sense in the context of what we've been looking at. Very famous words from Romans chapter 8. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all. How will he not also graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is it that condemns? Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, and nakedness, danger, sword. As it is written, for your sake we are being killed all the day long for we regard as sheep to be slaughtered. Know in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

[28 : 07] Now I could have just read that and not preached. That says it much better, much more succinctly, but also very related to the passage that we've been reading. Amen. Let's pray.

Father God, help us to understand you more and to grasp the wonder of the victory, the success, the overcoming in your terms and what it looks like and what it means. We know it's kind of the exact opposite so often of what maybe is offered in the world, this natural order of things. But Heavenly Father, help us to see with the eye of faith. Forgive me for all that I've left out of this amazing passage today, but may we be able to read it and take time to look at it today and listen for the voice of God through it all. So help us now. We look forward now to the baptisms and we pray your blessing on us through them and ask that Christ would have all the praise and all the glory for Jesus' sake. Amen.