

1 John 5: 1-6
Acts 10: 44-48
May 6, 2018
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In the passage we just heard, John makes a series of statements which don't seem to connect with each other.

1. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.
2. Everyone who loves the parent loves the child.
3. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.
4. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.
5. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world.
6. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.
7. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes in the Son of God?

Each one of these statements clearly bears truth, but how do they relate?

Let's take the first two statements: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. Everyone who loves the parent loves the child." John intends for his readers to recognize that they *are born of God*. They are assured that they are born of God, why? *Because they love the Son*. John is not setting a set of theological standards by which people can know if they are born of God. The people he is addressing are gathered in communities of worship to express their love for God in and through Jesus. He is saying, "Have no fear! You love Jesus. You love me."

The next three statements start a new theme: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world."

The shift from loving God to obeying his commandments is startling and maybe disturbing. Has John made a shift here? Has John abandoned the theme of grace which says that the proof of our being born of God is that we love God in Jesus? We hear the words “obey” and “commandments” and suddenly we fear we are back to religion as obeying a set of rules. There always seems to be fine print in the Christian message. Salvation is free but there are just a few rules you need to follow, a few doctrines you need to accept, a few expectations of how you will behave as a Christian—to be one of us.

This shift from love to obedience to commandments raises the question which has plagued the practice of Christian faith from the beginning: “How complete is God’s grace in and through Jesus Christ?” Is it utterly and totally unconditional? Doesn’t God have standards? Is God the ultimate permissive parent who tolerates our most outrageous behavior? This is the question raised by some of Jesus’ most memorable parables—most notably that of the Prodigal Son—more recently renamed by some, “Prodigal Father” because of his wastefully extravagant love for his son.

Indeed this is the very question raised in the tenth chapter of the book of Acts where Peter is called to the house of a prominent Roman military officer who has had a mystical experience by which he is instructed to send for Peter. Cornelius is a Gentile. Peter is a Jew. Peter observes all the dietary laws of the Law of Moses. Unaware that representatives of Cornelius are on their way to ask Peter to come and minister to Cornelius, he too has a dream whereby he is presented with a smorgasbord of unlawful food. He is commanded to eat this food. Peter protests that to eat this food would violate his obedience to the Law of Moses. He is told, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” To underline the importance of

the command, it is repeated three times. When he awakes Peter is puzzled. I rather think he wonders if he overdid the wine and garlic the night before. Yet all is made clear when representatives of Cornelius arrive and ask Peter to go with them.

Here is a case study for the verses from John's letter.

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The question raised by the story of Peter and Cornelius is simply this, "which commandments are we to obey?" Or, to expand the question, is there a higher law which overrides lesser ones? Is it possible for our obedience to some of God's laws actually to offend higher laws? On the other hand are there laws we can ignore because we trust we are following a higher law? Can we presume to know what laws apply to us and which ones we can reject as old and outdated?

You will thank me that I will not explore the ins and outs of this question about which libraries of books have been written. But let's review the verses from John to seek guidance.

1. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.
2. Everyone who loves the parent loves the child.
3. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.
4. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.
5. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world.

For John it all begins with believing that Jesus is the Christ. It begins with the great proclamation of the early faith, "Jesus is Lord." From this follows everything else: the assurance we have been born of God, the deep and holy impulse to love God's children *and* the loving

desire to keep God's commandments. This is summed up by Jesus in John's gospel when he tells the disciples, "If you *love* me *you will keep my commandments.*" (14:15) Keeping Christ's commandments is the inevitable outcome of loving Jesus. Commandments on their own can never lead to full relationship with God in Jesus Christ. But if we begin by loving God who we know in Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves *we will keep the commandments.* To quote Jesus again, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. By this all will know that you are my disciples" (13: 34-35)

Let us learn from this that we are claimed by a single proclamation: "Jesus is Lord." This is faith that overcomes the power of the world to destroy our experience of God in the land of the living. It sets our priorities so that we are led to be faithful, not out of blind and permissive acceptance, nor of a narrow focus on doctrine and rules.

In the end it was his utter trust in the proclamation that Jesus is Lord that led Peter to overcome his dietary scruples and dine with the gentile, Cornelius. It is what led Cornelius to be baptized and be welcomed into the family of God's grace. Let us recommit to the simple yet life transforming proclamation that "Jesus is Lord." Let us be as surprised as Peter was as to where it takes us. Amen.