

Sermon File # 1052

Scripture Text: 1 John 5:1-5

Sermon Title: *Authentic Faith: the Final Exam*

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Authentic Faith: the Final Exam

Introduction:

This past Sunday we returned to 1 John with the message from my brother, Phil, from 1 John 4:1-6, regarding “testing the spirits.” We were privileged to hear from him, especially in light of his extensive knowledge of world religions and cults that propagate a false gospel in the world today. In John’s day, already in the latter part of the 1st Century, false teachers had infiltrated even the churches of Asia Minor, and John was issuing a warning to be vigilant against these distortions and to remain faithful to the true belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

In the latter part of the fourth chapter, John once again returns to the theme of love as one of the important tests of assurance that we have received the gift of eternal life. John essentially says that if we really know God in a personal relationship of faith, we will necessarily love God, because God is love. And if we love God, we will also necessarily love his children, our brothers and sisters in Christ. With Chapter 5 it seems that a new thought is introduced (and it seemed so also to the one who first introduced chapter divisions in the Bible!), but some contend that 5:1 continues

John's thought of the love test (e.g. Marshall, 226). But in fact, in our text we see a concise summary of the three tests of eternal life—right belief in Jesus, right behavior in the world, and genuine love for fellow believers.

Follow as I read our text, **1 John 5:1-5**, which will be the final passage we consider in this series from a letter to encourage assurance of eternal life.

Some of you here today have just taken or are in the midst of taking final exams, whatever the level of your education. Here in Belgium these final exams are an important milestone and your success with these final examinations is a necessary step in order to graduate to the next level of school or even to graduate and receive your degree. (In fact, I learned this past week that some of our children have to take an exam to graduate from kindergarten!) As your church family we offer you our encouragement and prayers, that your examination period will be marked by peaceful confidence and that you'll be able to give a good account of the work you have invested throughout the academic year.

If you're in the midst of taking final exams at the end of your school year, you may not be in a mood for a sermon about a final exam and don't need to be reminded that exams are a "necessary evil." But in any case, tests, or examinations, are necessary for students and teachers as a method of evaluating progress in learning. They can be a positive or negative experience and a stressful or even enjoyable experience, depending on the severity of the test and the readiness and capability of the student. All good and conscientious students want to do their best on exams, and teachers delight to see a good performance by their students as an indication they are doing a good job in teaching.

I'm sure the apostle John would have been delighted to think everyone in the churches of Asia Minor, where this letter was circulated, passed these tests "with flying colors." But there were already those in the churches who were on a course of failure due to their distorted understanding of Jesus, their ungodly lifestyle and their failure, indeed refusal to exercise genuine love for others in the churches.

Today we are taking together John's final exam, which includes all three tests—the moral, doctrinal and love tests, which together form the mark of the new birth (Stott, 172), which is the link that holds the three tests together (Boice, 152). What John presents in this final exam is a picture of authentic, genuine faith that accompanies the rebirth and eternal life.

Last Sunday we heard about false, counterfeit spirits in the world that are deadly substitutes for the real truth of the gospel of Christ. We must test these spirits against the absolute, saving truth revealed in Jesus Christ. In today's text, John describes for us an authentic faith that gives unmistakable assurance that we have experienced the rebirth and have received the gift of eternal life. How do we know we have authentic faith? How can we know that we will pass the final examination?

John relates first of all...

The object and origin of authentic faith (verse1)

In this day and age there's no shortage of faith. In our post-modern culture, all "faiths" are purported to be equally valid. Only those that claim to be based on absolute truth are "off limits." Many people are seeking after their own path of enlightenment and are practicing great faith in whatever false teachings seem plausible and alluring, even belief in their own self-concocted religion or philosophy. Belief can be in almost anything, with the final results being equal. To the post-modern relativist, "all points of view on a given topic are equally valid, even though they are apparently incompatible" (McGrath, 32f).

Not only is there this "faith in faith itself," but also we're seeing faith and devotion to extremist versions of world religions leading to violence against Christians and others who don't follow their beliefs. Whether it's faith in faith or faith in falsehood, John's "final exam" calls for authentic faith in...

Jesus the Christ as the object

For John's congregations, to say that Jesus is the Christ was to say that everything that Judaism promised in the expected Messiah was fulfilled and true in Jesus of Nazareth (Yarbrough, 269). This meant that all of the Old Testament Scriptures, promising a Deliverer in the line of King David, one who could forgive sins and bring God's reign to earth, were fulfilled in Jesus, the carpenter's son, and itinerate teacher, who went about doing good and who was crucified on a cruel cross.

As John spells out in his Gospel and this letter, Jesus is the eternal Son of God, the living Word, without beginning in time, and the co-Creator of all that exists (John 1:1-18). As we noted in the opening verses of this letter (1:1-4), John and others testified to his reality and were convinced of his identity as the Word of life. His sacrificial death on the cross provided for our forgiveness of sins, and he continues to be our advocate with the Father (2:1f). Jesus' incarnation and sacrificial death is the supreme revelation of the Father's heart and demonstration of his unfathomable love (4:9f).

To believe in Jesus is not just to know he lived, died and rose again and ascended back to the Father. It's to believe in him, to call upon him, to stake your life, future and eternity upon his authority to forgive your sins and to give you eternal life in his kingdom, beginning here on earth. It's to trust in him, lean upon him, and rely on him for life itself. It's to enter into a personal love relationship with him that will endure throughout eternity. To believe in Jesus is to trust and follow him as Lord and Master, the supreme authority of your life. To believe on him is to pray in faith to him, trusting that he answers prayer according to his will (5:14f). Jesus is the object of authentic faith and...

Rebirth as the origin

Believing in Jesus with authentic faith that results in a personal love relationship is not something that comes about by human initiative, as John noted in his Gospel (1:13). In our text, John notes that “everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1). Here faith is not seen as the preliminary condition for rebirth, but as its result. Of course, faith is also the condition for the rebirth, as John makes clear in his Gospel (1:12, Yarbrough, 269). But here John is not showing how a person experiences the new birth; rather, his aim is to indicate the evidence which shows that a person stands in the continuing relationship of a child to his Father: “that evidence is that he holds to the true faith about Jesus” (Marshall, 227).

We know that God must draw us to himself by his initiative. As John Calvin noted, faith in Jesus is so far above the grasp of the human mind, we have to be drawn to Christ by the heavenly Father, “since none of us can ever ascend to Him by his own efforts” (298). “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast,” writes Paul (Ephesians 2:8f). The pronoun “it,” which is the gift of God, refers to both grace and faith. The entire conversion process is God’s initiated gift.

More literally this first verse says that “everyone who presently believes” in Jesus... “has already been born of God.” The perfect tense indicates that believing in Jesus is a direct consequence of “having been born of God” (Barker, 348). Our continuing faith in Jesus is the result of our rebirth. As Paul says, “Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him” (Colossians 2:6). Faith is not a one-time experience bringing about rebirth, but is an ongoing experience of trusting in Christ and following him as Lord. Unless we persevere in our faith, we run the risk of failing the test of genuine, saving faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). The Book of Hebrews is a call to persevere in faith and a warning against spurious “faith” that will prove to be faulty in times of testing (5:11-6:12).

Authentic faith is God-given faith that demonstrates itself in a continuing love/faith relationship with Jesus. Such faith is a sign of the rebirth, evidence that we have been born again as the children of God.

John describes next...

The operation of authentic faith (verses 1b, 2 & 3)

Once again John connects faith with love in this first verse, a theme that has recurred throughout, even dominating this letter. Faith that passes this final exam gives rise to definite actions. John concurs with the apostle Paul, who writes in response to debating over interpretation of the law, that “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6b). Authentic faith operates with...

Love for God and his children

John states the obvious, that when we love a father we love his children as well. Likely he's referring to familial love. In normal, healthy family relationships, children love the parents and also their siblings. So, John says, it's normal and understood that because we love the heavenly Father we love our brothers and sisters in Christ. Conversely, it's abnormal and even unthinkable for believers, who have become God's children through the rebirth, to not love everyone in the family of God. To fail to love is evidence there has been no regenerative faith experience. John says strongly, that to claim to love God and to hate and/or to fail to love a brother or sister in Christ is to be a liar (4:20).

Verse 2 seems to reverse John's usual argument. Instead of saying that our love for others is evidence of our love for God, as he argues in 4:7-21, John surprisingly says that our love for God is evidence we truly love the children of God. One scholar "solves" this reversal by re-translating this phrase as "This is how we know that we *ought* to love the children of God when we love God and keep his commands" (Marshall, 227).

But this "unexpected twist" is exactly what John intends to convey, integrally connecting love for God with love for others. Our love for others is grounded in our love for God, and we are to love others in God and love God in others. We love God's children properly by loving God himself obediently. As love for others demonstrates the genuineness of our love for God, so does our love for God demonstrate the genuineness of our love for others. Brotherly and sisterly love is proof of our love of God, but the reverse is also true (Smalley, 268).

In the previous passage (4:7-21), John describes the unique and costly love of God for us. The profound phrase we learned as children, "God is love," defines love rather than God. God is much more than love. He is holy, almighty, wise and so on. But when we say *God* is love, we've said all we can possibly say about love, this agape, sacrificial, unconditional, practical action on behalf of undeserving sinners (Scherer, 225ff). When we receive the love of God, we are transformed by it and become instruments of his love to others. As John says, our acts of love for others will be expressions of our love for and obedience to God (2b).

Essentially John is saying that we have evidence we are loving others in a God-like way because our love is rooted in our love for God and is not just humanitarianism or "benign humanism" (Yarbrough, 273). It's easier to convince ourselves than it is to convince others, who can more easily see the superficiality of our expressions of concern, when it's just for show or to convince ourselves of our own goodness (Bruce, 116). On the other hand, most people can see right through us if our actions aren't rooted in sincere love and genuine concern for them.

Authentic faith operates also with...

Loving and joyful obedience

In verse 3 John writes, “This is love for God: to obey his commands.” Loving God involves and demands obedience to his will for us, which is essentially to love him with our entire being and love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-34). Jesus’ interpretation and application of the Moral Law, the Decalogue, summarizes the way we are to love God and others (Matthew 5:17-48). As Paul says, “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10b). Because of God’s love working in our hearts, we seek to love him and others with God-like, sacrificial and caring involvement in meeting the needs of others.

John adds the important thought that God’s “commands are not burdensome” (3b). No doubt John is thinking about the onerous, oppressive legalism of the Pharisees, who delighted in placing intolerable burdens on others (Luke 11:46). Jesus invites us to come to him and receive his rest:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

When we have a love relationship with God, we know that his will for us is always for our everlasting good, and we learn to find joy in obeying his word to us, even it’s challenging or disturbing to our personal peace and comfort. As the psalmist repeatedly declared, the law, the words, and decrees of God lead us to experience the depths of God’s delights (Psalm 119).

The ways of God are not a legalistic and restrictive lifestyle, but rather are a life of joy and peace. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1a). God’s will for us is that we enjoy life in him as we live in step with the Spirit, experiencing love from him and for him, and allowing him to love others through us as we minister to and care for others. John is not a legalist, but “he recognizes that love is busy” (Morris, 1268).

Some of you may be carrying the burden of trying to please your parents or spouse, who never gave you their approval. You keep trying to perform for them, sometimes even though they may be long deceased. You’re trying to prove yourself worthy of their love and approval, which you are never likely to receive. This is a huge and unnecessary burden. We need to find the peace of God that assures us of his love for us and his delight in us and his desire for the very best for us. We don’t have to be afraid of God’s will for us because he wants the very best for us, that which is “good, pleasing and perfect” (Romans 12:2b).

“The burden of religion (man trying to please God in his own strength) is a grievous one” (Wiersbe, 166). Through the rebirth we have the Holy Spirit is us to enable us to do everything God commands and directs us to do, and even to do it with joy. The

way of legalism demands joyless, slavish and reluctant obedience. The Scriptures are not to be a burdensome rulebook or a dry, dreadful textbook, but rather are to be God's love letter to us (Wiersbe, 164).

John then describes...

The opposition and outcome of authentic faith (verses 4 & 5)

John reminds us that as God's children we are given his commands, which we find liberating and as the way to joyful and triumphant living. Authentic faith is known also by the opposition it encounters and by its outcome of victory over the world. In verses 4 and 5, John speaks of our victory over the world, and triumph assumes...

The opposition of the fallen world

As we've noted in this letter, John speaks of the world (kosmos) as the fallen world, representing everything, every being, and every force opposed to the Kingdom of God. As Paul notes, God's saving grace has "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13f).

In his Gospel, John uses "the world" (kosmos) as the people of the world God loved and for whom he gave his Son to die and to rescue (3:16). But in this letter, John warns us to not love this world or anything in it, including "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (2:15-17). A major part of our opposition comes from within our own sinful nature, as James makes clear (1:13-15). Paul says that upon receiving our new nature we are introduced to a conflict between our new desire to live for God and the old sinful nature that will tug against the new until the day we die (Romans 7:7-25; Galatians 5:16-26).

John recognized that the influence of the fallen world, which is under the rule of the devil, the evil one (19), had crept even into the church, in the form of false teachers and their heretical teaching that denied the full deity and humanity of Jesus as the Son of God (4:1-6). Even today we need to realize that the devil goes to church, and in the context of the community of faith we can encounter some of our worst opposition (2 Timothy 4:9-15). John writes his letter also to warn the churches of the divisive and deadly influence of lovelessness.

Jesus tells us that opposition to a life of faithful discipleship should not discourage us, but rather should serve to assure us of the authenticity of our faith. In fact, he says "Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you" (Luke 6:26a), and "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18f). Paul assured

Timothy and assures us that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Of course, we can encounter trouble from the world, not as a result of our godliness, which is a rebuke to its sinfulness, but also we can encounter difficulties and rejection because of our folly and irritating, offensive eccentricities. I think of my high school classmate, who, alas, was also a member of the church to which I belonged. He possibly did more damage than good to the cause of the Kingdom because of the way he openly condemned fellow students and by his odd and even offensive appearance and anti-social behavior. In a way, he got what he deserved.

We can expect opposition to true godliness and obedience to Christ, and should consider it as a confirmation of authentic faith and also should be assured of...

The outcome of victory

As children of God, belonging to his kingdom, we are already “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:37). Because of the cross and resurrection of Christ, and because the risen Christ is interceding for us (8:31-39), we need fear nothing nor any one, not even our real enemy, the Satan himself. Paul says there is no one whose opposition, threats or attacks can touch us apart from the permission of a sovereign, loving God (31).

Our present salvation and future, everlasting deliverance is assured because of Christ’s victorious death and resurrection. And even now, though we experience trials, opposition and the attacks of the world, the sinful flesh and the devil, we can rest in the victorious power of Christ, who will sustain us with his grace, protect us by his power, and guide and use our lives for his glory.

Our victory isn’t through a proud triumphalism that encourages separation from and even disdain for this world and those outside of Christ. Rather, our victory is like that of Christ’s victory—through suffering love and taking the way of self-denial and following in the steps of the Crucified (Matthew 16:24-27; 1 Peter 2:21). We live after the pattern and by the power of Christ, who submitted to the cross and trusted the Father to deliver him with his resurrection. That’s our pattern and the way of living that allows for the power of the risen Lord Jesus to work in and through us (Ephesians 1:18-23).

Faith in Christ gives us access to his deliverance from evil and his wisdom and grace for victorious living. John spoke earlier about the indwelling Holy Spirit’s being greater than the devil (4:4), enabling us to live in victory over the downward pull of the world. By living in step with the Holy Spirit, we are able to live above the downward tug of the old sinful nature and overcome the acts of the sinful flesh (Galatians 5:16-21). And as we live in step with the Spirit and allow him to rule in our minds and will, he produces in us his fruit of Christ-likeness (22f). We are assured of victory in spiritual warfare that comes through donning day by day and moment by

moment, through prayerful thinking and living, the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-20).

Paul speaks of the necessity of praying in the Spirit as essential for victorious living (Ephesians 6:18). And later in this fifth chapter, John assures us of our confidence in prayer: “This is the confidence that we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him” (5:15). Likely in the context this promise is not a *carte blanche* guarantee that we’ll be granted our “grocery list” of things we want for ourselves or even to make life easier. Rather, it seems John encourages prayer that should be confident of all we need to live victoriously in the way of the cross.

The key to victory is living by faith in Christ, being united with him in a faith/love relationship “so that his victory becomes ours” (Bruce, 117). Jesus announced his victory over Satan’s power, sin and death when he cried victoriously from the cross, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). The victory he accomplished is transferred to us by faith. We live in the victory of the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 12:11).

I’ve always enjoyed football, American style! Believe it or not, I was once a pretty scrawny kid, until I started filling out in middle school years and began playing on the high school then collegiate level. But when a scrawny kid, I learned to play with the bigger boys, and looked forward to recess, when we could go outside and play after lunch. (Recess was my favorite subject in school!) The two captains during recess football would take turns choosing up players to be on their side. Gradually, as I grew and proved my ability I would be chosen sooner and eventually became a captain. But as a scrawny kid, I loved it when the better-player captain would chose me because then I was confident we’d win! It’s great to know you’re on the winning team!

By grace God has chosen us to be in his Kingdom, and we can be confident, as we live and pray, that we’re on the winning side. I recall when someone asked the great world-wide evangelist Billy Graham if he was an optimist or a pessimist, in light of the chaotic and dismal state of world events. “I’m an optimist,” he replied, “because I’ve read the last page of the Bible.” We know how things will turn out, when the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, who will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). Everyone who has authentic faith shares in this present and future victory.

Conclusion:

John writes these verses of our text as the final examination to test the authenticity of faith in Christ. Faith is the key—faith that expresses itself in the right belief about

Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, right behavior in conformity with the word and will of God, and genuine love for God and for all of his children.

I pray that all of us here today will be able to take this exam and say, with joyful confidence, "I pass! By the grace of God, I pass!" Has this ever been your response, as you took a test, realizing only by God's goodness were you able to pass? And this is the way it is with this final exam allowing the gift of eternal life and entrance into the everlasting kingdom.

I know that it's only by the grace of God that you and I will pass this final exam. Apart from his mercy and grace we have no chance at all of passing. No more could I pass this test than I could pass a medical school entrance exam given in French! You see, I don't know only a few words of French, and I understand even less about medicine and medical practice. My only hope would be an immediate reincarnation as a French-speaking, scientifically and medically trained student of high intelligence!

The truth is, not one of us could pass this test on our own. And, praise God, we don't have to! God's Son was incarnated for us so we don't have to be reincarnated! He took the exam for us—he lived a perfectly sinless life and was crucified to satisfy God's justice against our sin. By his mercy and love, God then, when we accept and trust what Christ has done for us, will give us a passing grade. We don't just squeak by, just above a failing grade, but he puts us at the head of the class and on his honor roll. By grace, through child-like faith in Jesus, God puts us right with himself and credits us with the righteousness of Christ, and puts us on a path of growing in Christ-likeness until we reach perfection when we see Jesus face to face (3:2).

Then, as God's top honor students, we are enabled to live up to our new standing by the power of his Spirit in us, who enables us to keep on growing in grace, in spiritual knowledge, in right belief, right behavior and loving concern and generous, self-sacrificing love for others. And this self-giving life, ironically, becomes the most joyful, enriching, and fulfilling life imaginable. The life of authentic faith isn't always the easiest and most trouble free. You can mark my words on that one. But it's the best of all possible lives because it's the one given by God for your eternal good and his glory, on earth and also in the kingdom of the heavens.

John gives his final exam, but it's not yet for us the last test. We'll be tested until we breathe our last. But this test is to call us to examine whether or not we have authentic faith that's an essential mark of the new birth. Let's receive the grace of God now so that we pass the Kingdom of God entrance exam through authentic faith in Jesus, who alone qualifies us for eternal life.

Believing in Jesus, living a life that pleases God, and loving him and others, will give us all the evidence we need that we have the grace of authentic faith, which is the key to our present entrance into the kingdom and overcoming the Enemy within and without. Authentic faith in Christ alone and in what he has done for us is our present

evidence and will also be also our admission into the glorious New Heaven and Earth. May all of us here today look to Jesus and place all our faith in him alone!

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Why do you think John was compelled to repeat these tests for assurance of authentic faith/eternal life?
2. What do you think is involved in believing in Jesus as the Christ? Who initiates our faith in Christ?
3. How is faith in Christ exercised as a requirement for rebirth, and how is faith the continuing evidence of the rebirth, as John describes it?
4. How would you explain verse 2, that loving and obeying God is how we know that we love the children of God?
5. What do you think John meant by God's commands not being burdensome? In what ways did the law of God become burdensome in Jesus' day? In what ways has Christianity in our day become burdensome?
6. What is the opposition that we face from the fallen world?
7. How does faith overcome the world?
8. How do we receive and then grow in authentic faith?

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