*THE NECESSARY OBEDIENCE*

1 John 5:1-6

May 16, 2021

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has experienced the birth

which comes from God; and everyone who loves the Father loves the child.

This is how we know that we must be loving the children of God, whenever

we love God and keep His commandments. (1 John 5:1,2)

As John wrote this passage, there were two things in the background of his mind. First, there was the fact which is the basis of all his thinking: the fact that love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable parts of the same experience. In answer to the questioning scribe, Jesus had said there were two great commandments. The first laid it down that we should love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength; and the second laid it down that we must love our neighbor as ourselves. It’s the same thing. Loving God—to love our God—is to love our neighbor. There were no commandments greater than these. All else in the scriptures is commentary.

But also in his mind there was a natural human law of human life. Family love is a part of nature. The child naturally and instinctively loves their parents; and they just as naturally love the brothers and sisters whom their parents bore. The second part of v. 1 literally runs: “Everyone who loves him who begat loves him who was begotten of him.” Put much more simply that means: “If we love a father, we also love his child” So John is thinking of the love which naturally binds a person to the one who fathered them, and to the other children whom the father has begotten.

John transfers this to the realm of Christian experience. Christianity is a rebirth; the Christian undergoes the experience of being reborn. In this case the father who begets him is no human father; the father is God. And the Christian is bound to love God for all that God has done to reclaim and remake and give birth to a new soul. But birth is always into a family; and the Christian is reborn into the family of God. As it was for Jesus, so it is for you and me—the one who does the will of God, as we ourselves do, becomes our mother, our sisters and our brothers. The Gospel says, in Mark 3:35: “whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.”

Our love for God and our love of our brothers and sisters must be parts of the same love. They are so closely interlocked that they can never be separated. As it has been put, “The human being is not only born to love, they are born to be loved.”

Another English preacher said, “Everyone who has been born of God must love those who have been similarly ennobled.”

Long before this the Psalmist had said, “God sets the solitary in families” (Ps 68:6). The Christian by virtue of his or her rebirth is set within the family of God, and as we love the Father, so must we also love the children who are of the same family as we. To love God and keep God’s commandments is to love the brothers and sisters.

Verses 3 and 4:

For this is the love of God, that we should keep His commandments;

and His commandments are not heavy, because everything that is

born of God conquers the world.

Once again John reverts to an idea which is never far from the surface of his mind and the center of his thinking: *Obedience is the only proof of love.* We just can’t prove our love to anyone in any other way than by seeking to please them and to bring them joy. Love of God, then, can be made plain only in obedience.

Then John quite suddenly says a most surprising thing. God’s commandments, he says, are not heavy. We should note a couple of things here. By that he certainly does not mean that obedience to God’s commandments is easy to achieve. Christian love is no easy matter, as all of know by experience. It is never an easy thing to love people whom we don’t like, the people who sometimes hurt our feelings, the people who sometimes hurt or injure or seek to put us down in the eyes of our friends or in front of our supervisors, right? It is never an easy thing to solve the problem of living together; and when that problem becomes the problem of living together on the Christian standard of life, it does become a task of considerable difficulty.

Further, there is in this saying (‘and His commandments are not heavy’) an implied contrast. Jesus spoke of the Scribes and Pharisees saying, “They bind heavy burdens and hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with their finger” [they won’t lift a finger to them] (Mt. 23:4). The Scribal and Pharisaic mass of rules and regulations could be an intolerable burden on the shoulders of any human.

And the contrast? There is no doubt that John is remembering that Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:30). How then is this to be explained? How can it be said that the tremendous commands and demands of Jesus are not a heavy burden on any person? There are a couple of answers there.

First, it is the way of God never to lay a commandment on any person without also giving them the strength to carry it out. With the vision comes the power. And that’s just the business of the Holy Spirit, isn’t it? -- to be the effective part of God within and between us? So with the vision (given by God) comes the power of God to do it. With the need for it comes the strength. God doesn’t give us His commandments and then go away and leave us to ourselves. God is there always alongside and within our vision and our willing to enable us to carry out what God has commanded. God’s duty always carries with it God’s inspiration. What is impossible for us becomes possible with God, for with God‘s help all things are possible. It is one of the facts of human experience that we never know what we can do until we try. And even more so with God doing the work, huh?

And secondly (about Jesus’ yoke being easy and his burden light): there’s this truth. Our whole response to God has to be the response of love; and for love, no duty is too hard and no task is too great. That which we would never do for a stranger we will willingly attempt for a loved one. That which we would never give to a stranger we will gladly give to a loved one. What would be an impossible sacrifice, if a stranger demanded it, becomes a willing gift when love needs it.

There is an old and often-retold story which is a kind of parable of this. Someone once met a teenager going to school long before the days when school buses were provided. The teenager was carrying a smaller boy on his back, and the smaller boy was clearly lame and unable to walk, and so had to be carried. The stranger said to the teenager, “Do you carry him to school every day?” “Yes, said the boy. “That’s a heavy burden for you to carry,” said the stranger. “He’s not a burden,” said the boy. “He’s my brother.” Love turned the burden into no burden at all. So it has to be with us and Christ. His commandments are not a burden, they are a privilege; for to have to carry them is an opportunity to show our love.

Difficult the commandments of Christ are; burdensome they are not. For Christ never laid a commandment on a person without giving the strength to carry it. And every commandment that is laid upon us provides another chance to show our love. Our love: the strength to carry it. Our love: the Holy Spirit enabling us to be Christ’s in that love, huh?

And this is the conquest which has conquered the world, our faith. Who is the one who conquers the world but he or she who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

We have seen that the commandments of Jesus are not grievous or heavy, because with the commandment there comes the power, and because we accept them in love. To obey them is to receive an opportunity to demonstrate our love, and is, therefore, a privilege, and not a burden.

But there is still another great truth. There is something in the Christian which makes them able to conquer the world. The world, the world here, is the world apart from God, the world in opposition to God, the world which tries to make us forget God and to abandon the standards of Almighty God. That which enables us to conquer the world is *faith*.

What, then, is this conquering faith? John himself defines it. It is the belief that Jesus is the Son of God. That is to say, the conquering faith is belief in the incarnation. Why should that esoteric notion (incarnation) be so important and so victory-giving?

If we believe in the incarnation, in God’s becoming human, it means that we believe that in Jesus Christ God entered the world and took our human life upon Himself. If God did that, it means that God *cared* enough for men and women to lay aside God’s glory and take upon God’s self the limitations of humanity, which is an unimaginable sacrifice and the act of a love which way surpasses human understanding.

If God did that, it means that God *shares i*n all the kaleidoscope activities of human life, and knows the many and varied trials and temptations and sorrows of this life and of this world. It means that God is involved in the human situation. It means that everything that happens to us is fully understood by God; it means that God is in this business of living along with us. And since it is God who took human form, if it is God who is in this ride along with us, it is the power of God which is at our side to defeat the world, isn’t it?

Faith in the incarnation is the conviction that God shares and God cares, and the power of God is at work in the human realm, the realm, literally, of you and me./

Once we possess that faith, certain things follow. L:ook, you and I have the indestructible hope of final victory. The world did its worst to Jesus. It hunted Him and hounded Him and slandered Him. It branded Him heretic and sinner and friend of sinners. It judged Him and tried Him and crucified Him and buried Him. It did everything in its power to break Him and to eliminate Him. *And it failed*.

After the Cross there came the Resurrection and after the shame there came the glory. *THAT* is the Jesus who is with us. We have with us the One who saw life at the grimmest, One to whom life did its worst, One who died and who could not be held by death, and One who offers you and me a share in that victory which was His. If you and I believe in the incarnation, in the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then we have with us forever Christ the Victor . . . to give US the victory.

Amen.