

FIRST LESSON: Proverbs 3: 3-6
SECOND LESSON: 1 John 5:1-6
May 9, 2021

“Overcoming the World”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Once upon a time there was an old man who lived in Minnesota. His only son was in prison serving a long sentence. The man wanted to dig up his garden to plant potatoes, but it was very hard work. His son had always helped him before he got in trouble with the law. So, he wrote his son and said,

Dear Son,

I am feeling pretty bad because it looks like I won't be able to plant my potato garden this year. I hate to miss doing it because your mother always loves planting time, and we make extra money every year selling the potatoes. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot though. If you were here all my troubles would be over because I know you would dig the plot for me. I sure wish you weren't in prison.

Love,

Dad

The son got the message and he thought and thought. How was he going to overcome this and be able to help? Finally, he wrote back:

For heaven's sake, Dad, don't dig up the garden! That's where I buried the GUNS!

At 4 AM the next morning a dozen police officers showed up with shovels and dug up the entire garden without finding any guns. Confused the old man wrote his son and told him what happened. His son wrote back, "Go ahead and plant the potatoes Dad. It was the best I could do from here."

The scripture we read this morning from 1 John is about being an overcomer, but we start, as usual, with love. The author says that we know that we love one another if we love God and keep God's commands. This sounds like a strange reversal. How is that proof that we love one another? But the fact is, keeping God's commands directly involves loving one another. While some interpret "commandments" to be a reference to the ten commandments, fully half of which deal with how we treat one another, Jesus also said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

There is no actual focus on the law in 1 John. It doesn't appear in any of the letters of John. But the two basic underlying principles we have talked about repeatedly do appear—love of God and love of one another. Mutual love rules out harming one another. It is the underlying motivation of the law. In John's understanding love of God was not expressed in the esoteric experiences of the mystic Gnostic group then competing with the Christian community. It's not self-focused. It's about concrete consistent action on behalf of one another.

The ten commandments are merely a tangible expression of these underlying principles. As some have put it, justice is what love looks like in public. We deal fairly and honestly with one another. We protect the vulnerable. We work on behalf of the weak. We seek to provide for the well-being of all and make sure no one is exploited, harmed or discriminated against.

1 John says that God's commandments are not burdensome. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly 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 live in God's love to act in love is not a burden, because the Spirit makes it easy. And it is this same Holy Spirit who enables us to overcome the world.

Context is very important when it comes to what is next. We have lots of ideas about what being an overcomer means. Usually what we are talking about is someone who defeats the odds by sheer perseverance and courage. A poor person overcomes obstacles to become successful and prosperous. An injured individual overcomes disability through relentless and painful rehabilitation. Our potato planting son overcomes the limitations of his imprisonment to help his father by outwitting the authorities. When we talk about overcomers we focus on human strength and will. An overcomer defeats the odds and conquers. *But that is not actually what is going on in this cultural context.* Everything in this letter is designed to be a direct answer to and repudiation of a competing ideology. In order to understand what is being said we need to understand what is being refuted.

The early Gnostics groups favored two approaches to the world. Universal to both approaches was the idea that the physical material world was inherently evil and inferior. Everything physical, including the body, was bad. The whole idea was to overcome the body and transcend into the spiritual realm. The first approach, held by a minority of Gnostics, was that because the body was irrelevant, anything goes. You could be wildly immoral and it didn't matter. But as attractive as that sounds, the majority were ascetics. They practiced severe self-deprivation. There were no overweight Gnostics. They ate and drank the absolute minimum needed to survive, and made sure nothing tasted good. There were no large Gnostic families. They advocated complete abstinence from normal relations in marriage and upheld celibacy as the ideal. Marriage and normal physical relations were inferior and bad. Many of these ideas did unfortunately successfully infiltrate the church which came to elevate celibacy as a superior condition and poured shame on normal human desire. "The act" was reserved for procreation only and should be done with as little enjoyment as possible. Even today the current Roman Catholic Church is heir to this bias with celibacy being considered not only superior, but a requirement for the priesthood.

Being an overcomer for these people meant overcoming their own human bodies. For them "the world" included the whole physical realm. It meant ignoring hunger and desire. It meant living in isolated regions away from human company or in like-minded communities. No families. No physical comfort. Just silence and meditation in the desert, along with secret arcane

rituals and the acquiring of hidden knowledge. And of course, scorn and pity for those who could not attain their level of ascendance.

1 John answers this with a direct slap in the face. “Who is it that overcomes the world?” the author asks. “Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” Only the person who recognizes that Jesus came in the flesh can truly overcome the world. And this is clarified further in a phrase that is totally confusing to us. 1 John says, “This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood.” Many of the Gnostics taught that the Spirit of Christ descended on Jesus at baptism. That’s the water part. But they also taught that this same Spirit left before the crucifixion. But Jesus the son of God suffered and died. That is what 1 John means by “blood.” Jesus did not come to us by water only, but through water and blood. He came in the flesh and died in the flesh.

There are two types of people in the world today who give up physical comforts and normal family life. On the surface they may appear to be the same, but in fact they are very different. Those who adopt an ascetic lifestyle to attain their own personal transcendence are, like the early Gnostics, essentially self-centered. WE might think of them as super-spiritual, but that is an illusion, because everything they do, they do for self. They are very deliberate in their self-deprivation. This kind of practice is, bizarrely enough, somewhat selfish. The other type of people are those like Mother Teresa who do what they do to serve and rescue others. What they have or don’t have is beside the matter. Their purpose is not driven by self, but by service. Having “stuff” or not having “stuff” is just not important. The focus is different. The apostle Paul said he learned to be content in all circumstances. He wrote to the Philippians, “I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:11-13) Paul didn’t refuse a good meal or feel guilty when he was warm and comfortable. He simply sat loose to these things, and learned to be content regardless of his circumstances.

What 1 John is saying is that we overcome the world when we refuse to take it too seriously. We overcome the world when we set our own comfort aside to help another. We overcome the world when we open our home and our bankbook to help others. We overcome the world when the direction of our lives is outward, not inward.

Everything in our society encourages us to be both inward and self-centered. There are some people who refuse to get vaccinated because they don’t think it is important for them as individuals—not thinking at all about our corporate responsibility. But ironically, we as individuals also give a lot of power away. We’re self-focused, and yet we allow things outside of ourselves to dictate whether or not we will have joy in our lives. We say, “I won’t be happy until I get this raise, or move to a new house, or my spouse treats me better, or my boss leaves, or my medical condition changes.” As a result, we do not overcome our circumstances. Our circumstances overcome us. I cannot control what other people do. I cannot control many things in life. But I can decide

what my response will be. I can decide to focus on God and God's blessings. I can decide to take my eyes off myself and serve those in greater need. I can decide to sit loose to the things of this world. I can decide to be an overcomer. Amen.

Proverbs 3: 3-6

- ³ Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
- ⁴ Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man.
- ⁵ Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
- ⁶ in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.

1 John 5:1-6

⁵ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ² This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. ³ In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴ for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ⁵ Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

⁶ This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.