

## 1 JOHN 4:20-5:5—CHRISTIAN FAITH IN A NUTSHELL

**INTRO:** In any area of life that's important, we need to know what the real deal is. Several years ago Jerry Seinfeld made a name for himself by saying **“What's the deal with this or that?”**

For example, if you're thinking about getting into a relationship with someone, you need to know what he or she is really like. I think it was in the movie “What Women Want” that one of the characters said something like, **“If you want to know what a guy is really like, don't believe anything he says to you; pay attention to what he does.”**

When Nancy and I go food shopping, we read the labels. If you have to be a chemist to know what the item contains, don't get it.

In politics, all candidates from any party will say that they are for the people and want better government and all kinds of other platitudes. But you need to know where he or she stands on particular issues. And if you are a member of a particular party and so always vote for that party's candidate in the general election, then it's important in the primaries that you know where the different candidates who are vying for the nomination stand on certain issues.

The same is especially true with respect to worldviews, religion, and what we stake our lives on. You need to know what does a particular belief system involve and what does it imply. A lot of people think that all religions are basically alike or, at least, that all religions lead to the same end like many different paths all leading to the top of a mountain. That cannot possibly be true. Eastern religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, have fundamentally different conceptions of reality than do religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Eastern religions essentially say that reality as we understand it is an illusion. And although there are certain similarities among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, at their most important points they differ radically, especially concerning who Jesus is and what he came to do. Jesus's whole point at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in **Matthew 7**, was that there are *not* many paths all leading to the same destination, but that there are only two paths—Christianity and everything else—and they lead to radically different destinations.

Therefore, I think it is vitally important that we have a good understanding of what the Christian faith is and what it implies for our lives. Today's passage of Scripture—**1 John 4:20-5:5**—actually describes the Christian faith in a nutshell. So let's see what it says [**READ**].

**PROP:** This passage is showing us that, in the Christian faith, belief, obedience, love, and overcoming the world are all intimately connected—each one entails the others in an all-encompassing way of life.

Before we discuss the specific aspects of the Christian faith, take a look at the interconnections between belief, obedience, love, and overcoming the world in today's passage:

- “Love” is mentioned 9 times, and it is connected with loving God and loving people, with belief, and with obeying God's commandment.
- “Faith” or “belief” is mentioned 3 times and is connected with overcoming the world.
- “Obedience” and the commandments of God are mentioned 4 times and are connected with love.
- “Overcoming the world” is mentioned 3 times and is connected with faith and belief.

**O/S:** I am going to look at these four elements in what I think is their logical order, namely, belief, obedience, love, and overcoming the world.

**I. BELIEF:** Belief is logically first in the order of the Christian faith because without belief in Christ one can't be a Christian. It's one's beliefs that distinguish every different worldview. If you say, **“There is only one God and Muhammad is his prophet,”** you are not a Christian no matter how much you may look up to Jesus as a great prophet. This really should not be controversial.

What is the bottom line or substance of Christian belief? The bottom line of Christian belief concerns who Jesus is and what he did.

- Who is Jesus? Jesus is unique—he is the Son of God. In today's passage, **1 John 5:5** explicitly says that Jesus is the Son of God. That means that Jesus is the Lord; IOW, he is God himself come to earth as a man.
- What did Jesus do? Jesus came to earth to fulfill what is called the gospel which means “good news.” **1 John 5:1** puts it like this: **“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.”** The word “Christ” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Messiah.” The Messiah was the promised savior and king of the world. Some prophecies of the Messiah described him as a man; others described him as God. Jesus fulfills both.

What is this good news that Jesus came to fulfill? The good news begins with bad news. The bad news is that we human beings have a problem. The problem is that there is something wrong with us that we cannot fix. That is the problem of what the Bible calls indwelling sin. We are born with warped hearts so that no one is good and no one seeks after God. Instead, we are all self-centered. Our problem is that, on our own, we cannot change our own hearts. On the other hand, God is perfect and holy and cannot abide in the presence of sin. That means that we are separated from God—the God who made us and who sustains us and loves us and desires nothing but our good—and we will remain forever separated from him unless our sin problem—our heart problem—is dealt with.

That is why we need a Christ, a savior, a Messiah—someone to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. That is why Jesus came: to deal with our sin problem and reconcile us to God. He did that by living the life we should have lived. That qualified him to step into our shoes and, on the cross, die in our place and pay the price for our sins that otherwise we would have to pay for but never could.

- How do we know that Jesus is the SOG and actually paid the price for our sins on the cross? The answer is implicit in **5:1** and **5** when Jesus is called the Christ and the SOG, because those terms drawn on other passages in the Bible which flesh out their meaning. For example, **Rom 1:1-4** makes this clear by talking about **[READ]**. Thus, the Christian faith ultimately is founded, not on some moral or ethical principle—or even on the teachings of Jesus himself—but on an historical fact: *the resurrection of Jesus Christ*. The resurrection is the central fact upon which Christianity is based.

It proves that Jesus is unlike anyone else who ever lived but is the SOG (God come to earth as a human being), because no one who is only a human being can bodily rise from the grave after death. The resurrection also shows us that Jesus is the Christ, the savior, and accomplished what we could never accomplish on our own—atone for our sins and reconcile us to God—because the resurrection validates that God the Father accepted Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf, since he did not leave him in the grave.

If we believe that, then 1 John 5:1 tells us that we have been born of God; that means born again; IOW, we have passed from death to new life in Christ. This leads us to the next logical aspect of the Christian faith:

**II. OBEDIENCE:** As we have seen, **v.5** of today's passage speaks of **“the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”** **Rom 10:9** similarly speaks of the person who **“confesses with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.”** Remember what Wade said a couple of weeks ago about the difference between simply saying certain words and “confessing,” which implies heartfelt belief and acceptance of what you say.

Being the “Lord” means that Jesus is the master, the boss, the one in charge. Jesus made this clear in what is commonly called the “Great Commission,” **Matt 28:18-20** There he said **[READ]**. Notice that he has **“all authority in heaven and on earth.”** Therefore, he commands his followers to go into all the world and make disciples of others and **“teach them to observe [or follow, or do] all that I have commanded you.”**

The mark of a disciple is that he or she strives to be like the master. That means to be like Jesus. To have his heart; his mind; his will; his values; and to do the things he does. If we do *not* do that, then in no sense can we be called his disciples. Real Christian faith transforms our lives. And the proof of that is by what we do and don't do. Our obedience is the **“outward and visible sign of our inward and spiritual state.”**

But people can recognize someone as the boss and obey them, yet do so unwillingly or reluctantly. Christian faith is not like that. Which leads us to the third aspect of Christian faith:

**III. LOVE:** Love is at the heart of the Christian faith. John begins our passage today by talking about love. In **1 John 4:20** he says **[READ]**. Notice that there are two dimensions of our love: love for God and love for others. And that is precisely what Jesus said in **Matt 22** when he was asked, **“What is the greatest commandment?”** He said the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But then he immediately said that the 2<sup>nd</sup> greatest commandment is like it: **“love your neighbor as yourself.”** And then he said, **“On these 2 commands the entire Bible is based.”**

We must see something very important here. In **1 John 4:20** John is saying, **“How we do the 2<sup>nd</sup> command—loving our neighbor—is the proof and the test for whether we are really doing the 1<sup>st</sup> command, loving God.”** Why is that the case? I think it is because every human being has been created in the IOG. And how we treat God's image shows what we really think of him. **[EXAMPLE: NANCY'S PICTURE]**

This shows us that the Christian faith is designed to be very practical. God puts people in front of us every day and gives us the opportunity to show them love or not. A Hindu man once approached Mother Teresa. He pointed out that both he and Mother Teresa were doing social work, but there was a difference. The difference was that he was doing it for *something* whereas Mother Teresa was doing it for *someone*. She didn't help people simply because “it was the right thing to do.” She helped them because she knew, deep in her heart,

that by serving others she was serving Jesus himself. That's why she said that the poor people she encountered on the streets of Calcutta were **"Jesus in disguise."**

But in the next few verses of our passage, John gives us a more nuanced description of love for God and love for others. Notice how love is connected with obedience in today's passage:

- **4:21: "And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."**

That was the point of v.20. The word translated "brother" here means a sibling, so it applies both to males and females, sisters and brothers. IOW, all Christians are members of the same family—the family of God. And one mark of a good family is that family members always take care of their own. What John is saying here is like what Paul said in **Gal 6:10: "As we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are the household of faith."**

- But then notice the flip side of that coin in **1 John 5:2: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments."** This is almost the opposite of **4:20**. Here John is pointing out that to not love God himself when we claim to love his children is to not recognize that the person we claim to love is truly part of our same family. Therefore, if we don't love God and do what he says, we can never really show our brothers and sisters the true, familial love that comes from God himself.

- **5:3: "This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."** **4:20**, **4:21**, and **5:2** are all clearly talking about our love either *for* God or *for* others. But here in **5:3**, the phrase "love of God" is ambiguous. It can refer to our love for God, as the NIV translates it. And that certainly is keeping with obeying his commandments which show that we love him.

But I think the "love of God" can also refer to God's love for us. At first glance, our keeping his commandments might seem to be a strange way for *him* to show *his* love for *us*. But it really isn't. Jesus said, **"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"** (**John 10:10**). Because God *is* love, everything he does for us he does out of love and for our ultimate good. He knows that our greatest joy and satisfaction will only occur when we live in accordance with his will and his ways. That's why John says in today's passage, **"His commandments are not burdensome."** Living according to his will and his ways should not be a burden at all, but a joy.

There is one other thing to note about the love referred to in this passage: every time "love" is used, it is a translation of the verb or noun form of the Greek word *agapē*. That form of love has been defined as, **"a direction of the will and finding one's joy in someone else."** IOW, I have the same joy when you succeed as when I succeed. It goes back to **Matt 22** when Jesus said to **"love your neighbor as yourself."** If you think about it, that is an incredibly radical command. It means that we should be spending the same amount of time, effort, and money in seeking the good of others that we do for ourselves. None of us does that. But just think what a wonderful world it would be if we started approaching that. When Jesus said, **"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly,"** if we started practically applying what he said in **Matt 22** and what John is saying here, we would start to see that abundant life all around us. Which leads us to the fourth dimension of the Christian faith:

#### **IV. OVERCOMING THE WORLD: 5:4-5 says [READ].**

On the night before he died, Jesus himself prayed for his disciples, "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (**John 17:15-16**). In **1 Pet 2:11** Peter said, **"Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul."**

What are Jesus and Peter saying? They are saying that now we are *in* the world but as Jesus said, we are **"not of the world**. Instead, we are to be living as if we were "aliens and strangers" here (or, as the ESV puts it, as "sojourners and exiles"). IOW, Christians are to "overcome the world" by *not* having the world's values and its priorities. Instead, we are to value what *Jesus* valued, desire what *he* desired, and love what *he* loved. This means that we are to deny ourselves—IOW, the lusts and desires that the world all the time is trying to instill in us and will enslave us. In their place we are to live primarily for Christ, for others, and for the KOG. *That is* "overcoming the world."

How do we do that? **vv.4-5** talk three times about our overcoming the world. The middle of the three statements says that our faith is the victory that has overcome the world. The first and last of the three statements are in the present tense; they are saying that we are *now* actively overcoming the world.

What these statements are telling us is that the Christian faith is unlike any other religion or worldview. Why is that? The answer is that only the Christian faith gives us the power and ability to actually accomplish what it is designed to do. To a large degree, every other religion and worldview says, **"This is what you should believe and this is what you should do,"** but none of the other religions or worldviews actually give you the ability to accomplish what you are supposed to do. Christianity alone says that, when we come to true, saving

faith in Christ, a change takes place inside of us. We receive a new heart, we receive the mind of Christ, and we receive the Holy Spirit who comes to live inside of us and gives us the ability—that on our own we would not possess—to actually do the things that Jesus says we should do.

The Spirit of God works in connection with the Word of God. As we take God's Word deeply into us, the Holy Spirit powerfully works in us and empowers us so that:

- we overcome the world's spirit of covetousness which grips most of the people of the world;
- we overcome the fear of the world, the fear of public opinion, and even the fear of death; and
- we overcome the world's mindset that it is only through my money, my possessions, my fame, good looks, education, or power that I have significance and security.

Because the Holy Spirit is in us, we can have an intimate and vibrant relationship with the living God that is possible in no other religion or worldview. These are present realities that we can grasp and apply right now. As we do that, we will see changes in our lives that we never could have brought about in our own power.

**CONCL:** So what is the Christian faith in a nutshell? Our faith is in Jesus Christ: who he is: he is the Son of God; he is the Christ, the savior and king of the universe. And our faith is in what Jesus has done: he did for us what we could never do for ourselves—he paid the price for our sin and has given us new life. That life includes a new heart, his mind, and the Holy Spirit, all of which cause us both to desire to do what he says and give us the ability to do it. As he works in us, our hearts become changed. As our hearts change—as we become more and more like him—his values become more and more our own. And so we not only love him more but love our brothers and sisters and our neighbors more and more. And as we do *that*, the hold that the world has on us lessens, and we begin experiencing the satisfaction and joy that come from living the life he created us to live. The Christian faith is unlike any other. Don't leave home—and don't leave this place—without it.