

DO WHAT GOD SAYS TO DO**1 JOHN 5:1-12**

Restrictions are sometimes a very good thing. Years ago, a series of studies set out to determine how a fence might affected the behavior of children in the playground. The researchers constructed a playground with no fences. During the experiment, the children stayed in the center—almost in fear—and never ventured out beyond the playground structure. Then the researchers put up a fence. Immediately, the kids' behavior changed. Instead of fearfully staying in the center of the playground, they wandered with freedom all the way to the fence, exploring and enjoying the entire space. The researchers' conclusion? With a boundary, in this case the fence, the kids felt safer and more at ease to explore the entire playground space. In other words, fences enhanced freedom. It was the absence of fences that created fear. God isn't reluctant to tell us to do and not to do certain things. Think of them as His fences.

We're nearing the end of our journey through the New Testament book of 1 John. Just this Sunday and next, then we transition to something new. One of the best ways to understand 1 John as a whole is to recognize it presented three tests or marks of spiritual authenticity. Not every person who claims to be a Christian truly is one. There are spiritual imposters or counterfeits. And there are also others who are just ignorant of or mistaken about what it means to follow Jesus. So how do you know a genuine Christian when you see one? How do you know if you're truly a Christian? John, the author, said the first mark or test was doctrinal accuracy. Get Jesus right – who He is and what He did. Second, obvious growth in a godly lifestyle is a very important test. We're supposed to become more like Jesus. Third, loving God's people is also an essential mark of authenticity. Because God Himself is love, people who follow Jesus can't help loving others - especially those who belong to God's family.

John kept coming back to those three tests or marks throughout this little book over and over again, weaving them together in different ways. So, let's take up the next section and see what John had to say. There's a good example of those three tests of spiritual authenticity right in the first two verses. A different translation puts it like this: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God (*doctrinal accuracy*). And everyone who loves the Father loves his children, too. We know we love God's children (*loving God's people*) if we love God and obey his commandments (*growth in a godly lifestyle*)." (1 Jo. 5:1-2 NLT) One way to get at this section of 1 John is to recognize that Jesus followers are all about doing what God says to do. We live joyfully inside His fences. I want us to focus on three words.

GOD SAYS "BELIEVE."

That word "believe" shows up a whole lot in these verses. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.... Who can win this battle against the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God.... Since we believe human testimony, surely we can believe the greater testimony that comes from God.... All who believe in the Son of God know in their hearts that this testimony is true. Those who don't believe

this are actually calling God a liar because they don't believe what God has testified about his Son." (1 Jo. 5:1, 5, 9-10 NLT)

Most people in our culture today assume it's important to believe in something, but it's not very important what you believe. Whether it's logical, rational, and based on good evidence is far less important than if what you believe "works for you." For example, Sarah Michelle Gellar, was a big TV star some years ago. She once told a reporter, "I consider myself a spiritual person. I believe in the idea of God, although it's my own personal ideal. I find most religions interesting, and I've been to every kind of denomination: Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. I've taken bits from everything and customized it." That doesn't make Ms. Gellar a terrible person. She's probably a very nice person. She simply typifies how most people in our culture approach truth when it comes to God and spirituality. Apparently, you and I get to pick and choose things we like and want to believe to be true and discard the bits we don't like as false.

That's not what God means by believe. Believing means accepting as revealed truth a specific body of information concerning who Jesus is and what He has done. Doctrinal accuracy matters a great deal. What we believe about Jesus determines our eternal destiny, so get Jesus right. This was already a big problem back in John's day and time. There was a large group of so-called Christians deeply influenced by a secular philosophy called Gnosticism. Some of them believed Jesus was just a very good, but ordinary man born of the natural union of Joseph and Mary. Others believed the Son of God somehow descended on Jesus, the man, at His baptism, but then went back to Heaven before Jesus was crucified. The truth that God Himself somehow suffered and died on the cross in Jesus was unacceptable – unthinkable - to them.

Within just a few decades of the cross and the empty tomb, some people who identified as Christians were denying that Jesus was both fully God and fully human. John knew what was at stake and pushed back vehemently. He used terminology here that sounds a bit odd to us twenty centuries later but made better sense to the people in the first century. "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. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement." (1 Jo. 5:6-8 NIV)

What is that about? Water is a reference to Jesus' baptism and blood to His death on the cross. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit. The same Jesus who was baptized in the Jordan River was the very same Jesus who died outside Jerusalem. He didn't start or stop being both fully God and fully human. He was always both all the time. In addition, there's the witness of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit confirms in and to our hearts the truth that Jesus is who He claimed to be: God in human flesh. We know it personally because after believing in Jesus, the guilt of our sin gets removed, our character begins to change for the better, our prayers get answered, and we're enabled to love others.

Believing means more than intellectual acceptance of certain facts about Jesus, however. It also means to entrust your life to Jesus for this life and eternity. When I talk about getting right who Jesus is and what He did, what do I mean? Jesus was and is the Son of God, who also with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, make up one God in three Persons, the Holy Trinity. The Son of God became fully human in one Jesus of Nazareth who was born to a virgin teenage woman named Mary. He lived a sinless life. Around the age of 33, He died on a cross and then rose from the dead physically some three days later. His death – while terrible and unjust – wasn't a tragic accident, but the plan and purpose of God Himself. By it, God Himself in the person of Jesus paid the penalty for your sin and mine – death – thus making it possible to enter into an eternal relationship with God as our Heavenly Father. The eternal impact of this incredible event was assured forever in and by the resurrection on Easter. This same Jesus went back to Heaven after the resurrection and will come again one day in great power and glory. Those are the essential facts about Jesus we must believe in.

Now, when I entrust myself to Jesus, it simply means there comes a time in my life when I acknowledge those facts before God and make it deeply personal. I say, in effect, "Almighty God, I realize now Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead for me. On the basis of what Jesus did, I ask You to forgive all of my sins, send Your Holy Spirit into my life, and begin to change me from the inside out. Jesus is now my Lord, my Boss, from this day forward. I realize now that I have been made Your child forever and I look forward to spending eternity in Your presence. Loving Father, I cannot save myself and so I throw myself upon Your grace and love provided in and through Jesus." That's making it personal. That's entrusting. That's believing.

Is it important to believe? John answered that question definitively. "Surely we can believe the greater testimony that comes from God. And God has testified about his Son... Those who don't believe this are actually calling God a liar because they don't believe what God has testified about his Son." (1 Jo. 5:9-10 NLT) To not believe in who Jesus is and what He did is to call God a liar. Unbelief is not a minor human flaw to be overlooked, it's a serious sin that demands repentance. The end result of unbelief is eternal separation from God – a final and forever death. But to believe is to open ourselves up to the life God always intended for us to experience. "And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life." (1 Jo. 5:11-12 NLT) God says, "Believe!" Do what God says to do. Here's the next word.

GOD SAYS "OBEY."

"We know we love God's children if we love God and obey his commandments. Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome." (1 Jo. 5:2-3 NLT) Jesus Himself said much the same thing, "If you love me, obey my commandments." (Jo. 14:15 NLT) Last week, we asked the question about how you show your love for God. How do you demonstrate to God that you love Him? One answer is you take His love and show it others – especially fellow brothers and sisters in

God's family. When we love others, God feels loved. That's His "love language," so to speak. Well, another way God feels loved is when we obey Him. When our actions, our choices, our priorities, our attitudes, and our behavior increasingly reflect who Jesus was and is, God feels loved by us. God likes to hear our words of praise and thanksgiving, to be sure, but He feels loved when we do what He says to do in our everyday lives. That's one reason we have obedience as part of our picture of a disciple here at KRBC. It's the O in ROPES. A disciple of Jesus knows the importance and value of relationships, obedience, prayer, evangelism, and Scripture.

Now, don't get the cart before the horse! Meaning what? Some people think they can obey before they believe. They assume it doesn't matter what you believe about Jesus as long as you try and live a good, moral life. They try to obey the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule in their own strength. Right there is the problem. None of us can keep the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, or much else of what God desires us to be and do in our own strength and ability. You can't be like Jesus without believing in Jesus. When you first believe in Jesus – you put your trust in Him – the Holy Spirit enters your spirit. He, then, actually helps you with the obeying part. So, don't try to obey your way into pleasing God. Never works! Instead, first believe in Jesus – entrust yourself to Him - so He can help you with the obeying part.

On the other hand, don't claim to believe in Jesus and yet make no effort to live a life that pleases Him. Some people say, "Oh, I believe in Jesus – who He is and what He did." But their everyday lives show little evidence of Jesus' presence. They're comfortable in accommodating actions and attitudes in their lives that God hates: greed, pride, racism, deceit, sexual immorality, selfishness, abusive anger – just to name a few. You can't love God and, at the same time, put up with and tolerate what He hates in your life. You know you love God when you love the things He loves and you hate the things He hates. When you truly love someone, you love to please him or her – to make them happy. If you love God, you want to please Him. You make Him happy when you obey Him in your everyday, walk around life.

Don't miss something important John said about obeying God: "His commandments are not burdensome." (1 Jo. 5:3 NLT) Obeying God isn't something heavy, difficult, or impossible to do. God is not about crushing you under a whole lot of rules for life and living. It's easy to assume obeying God means trying to measure up to impossible standards, or having to abide by thick books or long lists of rules large and small. Some think God expects us to be perfect. Nonsense to all of that! That word "burdensome" means trying to carry around some crushing, terrible weight. God doesn't want that for us or treat us like that. Instead, Jesus explained it this way, "Come to me... and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." (Mt. 11:28-30 NLT)

Part of our problem with obeying God has to do with not understanding why God gave us His commands – His fences - in the first place. The Ten Commandments are a good

example. Why does God tells us to not to lie, not to steal, not to murder people, not to have sex with anyone we're not married to, or not to covet what others have? They were given to help us, not hurt us. They were given to bring joy and keep joy in our lives, not to deprive us of any joy. They were given to protect our lives, not destroy them in any way. All of God's commands in the Bible are like that.

I was reading this week about some people who worked cleaning rooms at a hotel located directly on the white sands of the Gulf of Mexico. They enjoyed running around barefoot in the sand on their work breaks. The problem was the hotel required all employees to wear shoes at all times on the job. The majority of these employees thought this rule was an absurd restriction on their freedom. To them, the rule to wear shoes felt like employee harassment. But a minority of the employees understood and appreciated the rule. Sometimes late night parties in the hotel rooms would produce small pieces of broken glass in the carpets. Occasionally a stick pin would get hidden in the carpets and cause considerable pain to a bare foot. Some employees also discovered the pain of skinning their bare toes on the steel bed frames while making up the beds. They saw the rule to wear shoes as protection, not restriction.

Are God's commands meant to make your life miserable? Of course not. When you have the humility, the trust, and the good common sense to obey the One who designed life and created you to enjoy it and flourish in it, you're the one who gets blest. God says, "Obey." So, choose joy. Choose protection. Choose blessing. Choose life. For you own good, do what God says to do. Here's a third word from God for us today.

GOD SAYS "OVERCOME."

"For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." (1 Jo. 5:4-5 NIV) How many of you have ever purchased something from Nike – shoes, athletic clothes, whatever? The word "Nike" comes from the Greek word "nika" which means "victory" or "to overcome." It's used in the verses we just read. It assumes you and I are in some kind of battle or contest where someone wins and someone loses, someone is the victor and someone is defeated. It assumes we will encounter enemies, obstacles, and opposition as we journey through life and either defeat them or be defeated by them.

If we had the time today, we could look at several Scriptures that reveal you and I have three great spiritual enemies in this life we're supposed to defeat and overcome: our own sin, the world, and the devil. Sin means each one of us has this innate tendency to be easily tempted to do things that offend God, damage others, and hurt ourselves. For example, the Bible tells us to tell the truth and not tell lies. But sometimes we're tempted to be deceitful. So lying and being deceitful is something we need to overcome. By the world, the Bible doesn't mean planet Earth literally. It means godless and harmful values, attitudes, and perspectives about life and living that can have a powerful influence on us. For example, in our culture many people see money and the

things money can buy as being all important. Money is a kind of god for some people. Materialism, then, is something we need to overcome. The Bible also makes it clear we have a third great enemy – the devil – whose purpose is to prevent anyone from becoming a follower of Jesus. If that happens, then he settles for making you as irrelevant to the Kingdom of God as possible. One of the great, ongoing battles you and I will have in this life is with the devil. He needs to be defeated and overcome daily.

The Bible makes two very important assumptions in this whole overcoming business. First, Jesus followers aren't immune or exempt from life's problems and struggles. Godly people get seriously ill, face financial setbacks, have relationship problems in their families, lose their jobs, and face death just like everyone else. In some countries, they face terrible persecution for following Jesus. If you became a follower of Jesus in order to escape hard things in life, you signed up for the wrong reason. Second, Jesus promises us His personal strength to overcome our own sin, the world, and the devil. He said, "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." (Jo. 16:33 NLT) Jesus lives in us His followers through the Holy Spirit. When obstacles and enemies come against you, God wants you to seek Him all the more. He wants you to discover that you can indeed do all things through Jesus who gives you strength.

When we love others, God feels loved by us. When we obey Him, God feels loved by us. Here's something else I believe is just as true. When we sincerely make the effort to overcome our spiritual enemies, God feels loved by us. Some so-called followers of Jesus give up on Jesus as soon as some kind of significant trouble or heartache comes into their lives. They say, in effect, "If following Jesus means I still have to deal with hard stuff, who needs Jesus?" They miss an opportunity to demonstrate their love for God. Instead, set your heart and mind to be an overcomer spiritually. When you fail (and you will), get up and start again. When you meet some obstacle or enemy, trust God and keep going. Don't give up or throw in the towel. When you feel weak and defeated in whatever battle you find yourself in today, keep trusting in Jesus and His strength. He will not leave you or abandon you. And as God gives you the strength to prevail and you hang in there with Him, He feels loved by you. God says, "Overcome."

Have you ever heard the parable about an old dog that fell into a farmer's well? What to do now? After some thought, the farmer felt bad about the dog, but decided that neither the dog nor the well were worth the trouble of saving. Instead, he planned to just bury the old dog alive in the well and put him out of his misery. When the farmer began shoveling dirt down into the well, the dog got very concerned. But as the farmer continued shoveling and the dirt kept hitting the dog's back, a thought came to its mind. The dog realized that every time a shovel full of dirt landed on his back, he could shake it off and step up. And that's what the old dog did. In order to encourage himself, he kept on repeating, "Shake it off and step up. Shake it off and step up. Shake it off and step up." Despite the pain of getting hit by the dirt and the anxiety in the situation, the dog fought panic and just kept on shaking it off and stepping up. Before too long, the old dog - battered and exhausted - stepped triumphantly over the wall of that well. And

here's the irony. What seemed determined to bury him actually benefitted him – all because of the way he chose to handle the trouble he found himself in.

Shake it off, Christian, and step up. Overcome. Face the problem. Refuse to give into panic, or bitterness, or self-pity, or the lie God has abandoned you. The trouble the devil would love to use to bury you has the potential in God's hands to bless you. So, do whatever you have to do or need to do. Forgive. Pray. Praise. Hope. Shake it off and step up. Believe. Obey. Overcome. Do what God says to do.