

Complete Joy: Loving Prayer

1 John 5:1-5, 13-20 (CSB)

¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father also loves the one born of him. ² This is how we know that we love God's children: when we love God and obey his commands. ³ For this is what love for God is: to keep his commands. And his commands are not a burden, ⁴ because everyone who has been born of God conquers the world. This is the victory that has conquered the world: our faith. ⁵ Who is the one who conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? ¹³ I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. ¹⁴ This is the confidence we have before him: If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked of him. ¹⁶ If anyone sees a fellow believer committing a sin that doesn't lead to death, he should ask, and God will give life to him—to those who commit sin that doesn't lead to death. There is sin that leads to death. I am not saying he should pray about that. ¹⁷ All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin that doesn't lead to death. ¹⁸ We know that everyone who has been born of God does not sin, but the one who is born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. ¹⁹ We know that we are of God, and the whole world is under the sway of the evil one. ²⁰ And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know the true one. We are in the true one—that is, in his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

Over the last five weeks, we have listened to the Apostle John lead us with God's Word to make his and our joy complete. Part of that complete joy comes from having fellowship with God through faith in him which also unites us with all other believers around the world and throughout time. This then gives us fellowship in Christ's Easter victory over sin, death, hell, and Satan himself, a victory that we immerse ourselves in as we love God's Word. We are confirmed in this fellowship as we love as Jesus loved us, loving with both words and actions, serving others without getting anything in return, and sharing our first love – God who loved us first.

We Christians are born again, born of God by what he has done for us. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father also loves the one born of him. This is how we know that we love God's children: when we love God and obey his commands. For this is what love for God is: to keep his commands." (verses 1-3a) Being a Christian is not just a belief, it is a major life change. Loving God is keeping his commands, loving when someone hasn't earned it or deserved it, thinking of others ahead of yourself, forgiving someone when you don't want to. This does not come naturally. It requires denial of our sinful nature which rears its selfish head wanting to service itself.

Obedying God's commands all the time feels like a lot. There's always more to do. Then those commands extend into your home life, your work life, your friends, your family. And church is asking you to do things here as well. It's easy to get burned out by all the ways you can be trying to obey God's commands, to work yourself to exhaustion. Then you just stop. You give up because you can't go any farther. Exhausted, we can grow callous to the needs of others, stop feeling compassion for them, and give up keeping God's commands and loving like Jesus loved us. And so we sin, but is this the sin that leads to death?

John tells us, "There is sin that leads to death." (verse 16) and "All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin that doesn't lead to death." (verse 17) That's weird. So, let's pull that apart a little bit. Elsewhere in his Word, God makes it clear that the wages of sin is death and the soul, the person, who sins is the one who will die. Any sin results in the consequence of physical death. But John writes about another kind of death: the second death, a spiritual death. That death is the damning of someone to hell, separated from God and his love for all eternity. Ultimately, there is only one sin that damns a person, and that's the sin of rejecting Jesus as their atoning sacrifice, as the one who paid for all their sins to bring them into fellowship with God. This side of life, a person can still, by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, come back from that unbelief in Christ to belief in him. But if they die in that unbelief, there is no coming back. That's the sin that leads to death: unbelief.

When we feel God's commands are burdens, when we stop caring about others because we are exhausted, when we stop loving like Jesus loved us, when our actions betray the words we say we believe, we are in danger of going down that path of unbelief, a path that takes us out of our fellowship with God and away from our fellow believers. We worry that we have committed the sin that leads to death, that we have become an unbeliever. This drains us of all joy.

Knowing that this is a real temptation and threat to our complete joy, John wrote, "And his commands are not a burden, because everyone who has been born of God conquers the world. This is the victory that has conquered the world: our faith." (verse 3b-4) If you feel like you are fading from your belief in God, come back to the fellowship you have with Christ, fellowship with his victory over your sin. You belong with him, and you therefore live for him.

John did not tell us to love God by obeying his commands to give us a burdensome to do list. Instead, "I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." (verse 13) God's commands are an opportunity to show that we believe in God as our Savior from sin. We don't love God by simply ticking boxes next to the Ten

Commandments in order to earn a passport to heaven. No, we do them because of God's love story, because he loved us first. When we think of chores at home, we get ourselves focused on the "have to's," that these are unjoyful obligations and inconveniences, things that take us away from what we really want to do. Flip it. Instead of looking at God's commands like a to-do list of chores, remember that God has already loved you first and made you perfect. He has already kept all God's commands and taken away all the times that we haven't. He freed you from the chains and influence of sin. You get to serve God. You get to love your brothers and sisters in Christ. You get to show love to people who don't know that God loved them first so that they can they their first love. His commands give us purpose and direction for our lives, providing evidence that we do believe in him and so have conquered the world and the evil one sharing in the fellowship of Christ's eternal victory.

But let's not pretend that we don't struggle to do these things and feel like we want to quit obeying God's commands. In that struggle, God gave us a gift to help us, a gift that goes to make our joy complete. He gave us prayer. In prayer, we share our vulnerabilities and our shortcomings, humbly admitting that we don't love as God loved us. Sometimes we don't even come to the Lord in prayer because we are too overwhelmed with life's to-do lists. We think we just need to put our heads do, check off these boxes, and this is how we will make it through life. But this is how God's commands become burdensome.

Instead, love God's gift of prayer because we are struggling with obeying his commands. It might look like this: Lord, help me not to see your commands as a burden. Remind me that you loved prayer for me, taking time to pray by yourself, teaching your disciples and me how to pray, and now always living to intercede for me. Remind me that I am freed from sin by your sacrifice on the cross and have your eternal victory over sin, death, and the devil because of your resurrection on Easter Sunday. Remind me that you have brought me into fellowship with you, already made me perfect in your sight. Remind me that the Holy Spirit also intercedes for me, aligning my prayers to your will so that I can have confidence that you will answer all of my prayers in the best possible way no matter how I feel when I pray. As John wrote, "This is the confidence we have before him: If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked of him." (verses 14-15) Let me see the command to love as you loved me as repeated opportunities to share your love with others. Keep me in you and your Word so that this joy of obeying your commands would grow each and every day. As I read your Word, help me to mark down specific things that I can pray to you about, ways to live out of my love for you. Keep me from straying from you and your Word. Don't let me become exhausted with serving you, but renewed and filled up with your first love of me. Give me the confidence that as I pray and live for you and love like you, the evil one cannot touch me.

In loving God's gift of prayer, we don't just pray for ourselves, but we pray with and for the fellowship of believers that we have. John wrote, "If anyone sees a fellow believer committing a sin that doesn't lead to death, he should ask, and God will give life to him—to those who commit sin that doesn't lead to death." (verse 16a) Since the sin that leads to death is the just punishment of God for the person who rejects what he has done for them, we're not praying that God would not justly judge unbelievers who reject him in unbelief. But we pray for anyone of our fellowship who is sinning because whenever any of us sins, we are straying from God and the perfect fellowship we have with him. Pray that they would repent and return to our fellowship. Pray that God would use you to help them return.

Earlier this year, our members received an updated directory in their mailboxes. Have you ever considered using that for content for your prayers, combining the love of the fellowship we have with God and another and loving his gift of prayer? As you go through the directory, if see a name and can't picture the person, pray for them. Love with words and actions by stepping up and reaching out to them, introducing yourself. Write them a card. Send them a text. Drop them an email. Give them a call. Do this to tell them that you were thinking of them, praying for them, your brother or sister in Christ, that you would love to see them and get to know them. Show them that you care about them because they are a part of this fellowship we have with God and one another. Praying and then seeing God work to bring people back to our fellowship goes to make our joy complete.

The complete joy that John wrote to us about probably looks different than what we would choose or think would make our joy complete. Loving fellowship, loving like Jesus, loving the Word, sharing first love, and loving prayer is not a life free from expectations or commands. It's not a life free from suffering or pain or persecution of difficulty this side of heaven. It's not a life with a license to do whatever I want whenever I want. It's living the life God has made for us. It's living life for others. We do this until the day our joy is made unalterably complete in heaven. We know that day is coming because "we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know the true one. We are in the true one—that is, in his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life." (verse 20) He makes our joy complete now and forever. Amen.