

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church
Brillion, WI

Holy Trinity
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1 John 5:5-12

Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. 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. We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

An article in USA Today came out early this week entitled *7 Mistakes to Avoid in Retirement Planning*. The list was helpful, but mostly unremarkable until it got to mistake number 7. Here's what the article said: "The psychological mistakes are tougher in my opinion... Many people identify what they do as who they are... It is their identity. It can be difficult to let go of that." It is interesting that that comment didn't come from a psychologist, pastor, or therapist. It came from a financial adviser, which means that this is such an important retirement issue that a financial advisor was willing to go way beyond his field of expertise to make the comment.

It's far more than a retirement issue. It was back in my seminary days when I noticed how differently people approach their identity. It happened when I studied Spanish in Puebla, Mexico. I remember walking into a room where I didn't know a soul and started to go around and find out who they were. I never forgot the look I got when I acted like the American I was. I walked up to the first person. They asked me who I was and I told the person, "I'm a student here learning Spanish." I got this weird look - I didn't understand it - like the person was saying to me, "That's not what I asked you. I asked you who you were." Then I returned the question, "Who are you?" And the person started to say, "Well, so and so is my wife and so and so are my parents." And that's when it hit me. This was an identity issue.

My new Mexican friend identified himself by his family. I identified myself by what I did. And you know what? We were both wrong. Sin has wreaked so much havoc in this world and in us that it shouldn't surprise us to find out that we have identity issues. What else can explain all the different possible answers to the question, "Who am I?" "I work at Ariens." Or, "I live in Brillion." Or, "I'm the son of so and so." Or, "I'm the owner of a thriving small business." Or, "I'm the father of that football star." All of those things may be true, but none of them make us who we are. We need to know our real identity. We need to know who we truly are. That's where

the Apostle John helps us today. He tells us in 1 John chapter 5 about who our Trinitarian God has made us to be.

The war for the Christian's identity is one that God's been fighting for a long time. Some of the most epic statements in the Bible come down to identity issues. When Paul says, "Let the person who says this be eternally condemned," he was going after people who had the wrong idea about how people become who they are before God. The Apostle John fights a similar battle in this letter. He even goes so far as to call some people, "antichrists," because their teaching was so off about God and us. And that's where it starts. Once we have the right teaching about God's identity, then the right teaching about our identity follows.

Watch how closely God's identity is linked to ours in John's words, "**Who is he that is overcoming the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. (v. 5)**" Notice two important identity issues in this verse. First, we are given identities. We are people who are overcoming the world. We are world conquerors. We are the true winners. What gives us that identity? Not our jobs. Not our families. Not our productivity. Our faith in Jesus does. Then comes the second identity issue in this verse, the identity of Jesus Christ. We identify him as the Son of God. We believe he's actually divine.

It's a shame that John had to write that. It's not like John had not just got done saying a few years earlier, "These are written that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, *the Son of God.*" It's not like he had failed to spend an entire Gospel telling the history of how real and obvious the divinity of Jesus Christ was to everyone who knew him. And yet here he is having to pound that point home again. Why? Our identity is linked to Jesus' identity. If someone can redefine Jesus, they will also redefine us. And Satan knows that so he goes right for the jugular and tries to redefine Jesus. Back in John's day it was people who seemed to be saying, "You know Jesus really was divine from his baptism until just before his crucifixion, but he wasn't divine when he died. God can't suffer and die. That's too ugly." And the Christians apparently were having a hard time putting two and two together to think, "If Jesus wasn't God when he died for me, then his payment has no value for me. That means I'm cooked goose for eternity."

If you think that's an ancient problem, think again. It's one of Satan's best tricks to redefine Jesus to empty out his sacrifice of any real meaning. Why do you think Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Jews, and Muslims all empty Jesus of divinity? It makes Jesus mean nothing to us. We, of course, believe that Jesus is God. So we're all good, right? Wrong. Our problem is not in what we believe about Jesus. Our problem is that we don't take the next step often enough or powerfully enough. We don't let what we know about Jesus tell us who we are.

What do I mean by that? Remember that John said the person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God, "is overcoming the world." Do you see what John did there? He connected Jesus' identity to yours. Jesus makes you who are you right

now. That's important. John didn't use the past tense saying, "If you believe in Jesus you have conquered," like your conquering activity is over and done with. He used the present tense saying, "People who believe in Jesus are conquering on a daily, hourly, and minute to minute basis. In Jesus Christ, they're winning their entire life long." John is saying that in Jesus Christ you are a victor.

The devil, of course, hates that identity. That's why there is nothing the devil won't use in your life to get you to believe the lie that you're a loser. He'll use bullies in your high school. He'll use bosses at work. He'll use the captain of your basketball team and even those nearest and dearest to say to you, "You're not worth a hill of beans to God or anybody else." The flipside is also true. There is nothing the devil won't use in your life to get you to believe that you're a winner outside of Jesus Christ. He'll use your incredible success on the football field. He'll use the flattering remarks of your co-workers. He'll use your skyrocketing career. He'll even use success in church stuff to say, "You know why you really matter, right? You're smart. You're productive. You're this or you're that." Here's what it comes down to: If we stake our worth and our identity on anything related to ourselves, we will end up believing one of these two lies. Either lie A. I am a loser because I don't measure up or lie B. I am a winner because I do measure up outside of Christ.

The only way to deal with those lies are to replace them with God's truth. Let me say that again. GOD'S truth. John makes it explicitly clear that he's not telling us *his* ideas about Jesus and us. They're the Trinity's ideas. He uses terms like "the Spirit who testifies," and, "God's testimony," a whole bunch of times. When you read the verses here you kind of feel like saying, "Whoa God! I get it. Testimony. Witness. Truth. I hear you loudly and clearly." God is basically saying to us, "I'll testify in the court of your heart swearing to tell you the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help myself ('cause he is actually God)."

"And this is the testimony: God has given eternal life, and this life is in his Son. (v. 11)" This is God's testimony. This is what he's swearing on himself to be the whole truth and nothing but the truth. God has given eternal life. This life is in his Son. Do you see it? You are who you are because of Jesus Christ. As God, he defines who you are and where you're going. Nobody else on God's green earth has the right or power to do that. That's a divine right.

There's a Christian song sung by a guy named Rich Mullins. The words he writes are kind of a tongue twister, but they really capture what John is saying. He says, "And I believe what I believe is what makes me what I am." That's exactly what John said. You believe that Jesus is the Son of God. That makes you a person who daily conquers because you have eternal life.

Do you see how that changes everything for you? I want to go back to that article from USA today. Remember the financial advisor said that when people retire they have trouble because when they stop working they lose their identity. He should've stopped there because when he went on he started giving bad advice. He went on to

say, "People need to look at what their hobbies are. People retire and they don't have hobbies, things they enjoy doing." Treating an identity issue by saying, "Why don't you go buy a fishing boat or take up golfing?" Is like treating a broken arm with sugar water. It's just a distraction. Christians don't do that.

Christian people who retire say to themselves, "Today nothing is new or different with me. I'm no less valuable. I'm no less important. My position, authority, or pay scale has never defined me. Jesus Christ defines me. While I was working, I was always first and foremost a person in Christ. I was never haunted by my successes or failures. I was always the same in Christ - a victor, a person with eternal life. And now I'm retired and nothing has essentially changed for me."

I'll tell you what. I wish I could go back to the high school version of myself and explain that same thing. You know what I'd tell him? I'd tell him, "Who you are is not determined by what your friends think of you; what the girls gossip about you; what your GPA says about you; or how you perform on the basketball court. That's not the you that really matters. That doesn't define you. It doesn't make you you. Christ has told you who you are. In him, you are always a winner."

And, no, I'm not picking on my high school self, nor am I going after retired folks. Identity issues can plague people of every age with guilt or pride, despair or arrogance depending on which of Satan's lies we believe. But John isn't going to let that happen. God has delivered to us intact the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. John fought for that truth in his first letter. Later in church history, people died for that truth. That's why we say stuff in the Athanasian Creed like, "If you don't believe this, then you will perish." We are adamant that God is in Christ. We believe that and that makes us who we are: victors in Christ. Nobody can take that away from you. Not your mother-in-law. Not your boss. Not retirement. Not a disability. Not death. Not an angel. Not high school. Not a demon. The ruler of this universe, the Holy Trinity, has made what you are in Christ. And that's what makes you who you are. Amen.