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HOW TO WIN

1 John 5:1-5

No one wants to be a loser. Sadly life offers many opportunities for us to see ourselves as just that. At times it can be painfully hard on us. The *New Delta Review*, a literary journal in Louisiana, sent a letter to someone who sent in a manuscript in hopes of publication. The letter read, “Thank you for submitting. Unfortunately, the work you sent is quite terrible. Please forgive the form rejection, but it would take too much of my time to tell you exactly how terrible it was. So again, sorry for the form letter.” I’ve received a few rejection letters in my day. None of them was as brutal as that one, but rejection never feels good. It makes you feel like a loser.

Charles Schulz became a huge success in life by writing a comic strip whose central character, Charlie Brown, is a lovable loser. Charlie Brown was Schulz’s alter ego, his expression of how he felt he had generally gotten the short straw in life and was truly a loser. Part of the reason for the popularity of that comic strip was so many people identify with Charlie Brown.

But what does it mean to win in life, and how can we become the winners that everyone wants to be? That is not as straightforward as we sometimes think. In 2017 the Houston Astros won the World Series championship, becoming the ultimate winners in the baseball world. By everyone’s estimation they were a terrific team, deserving of that championship. But word would later leak out that they had cheated for much of that season, including in the World Series. They were good enough that they might well have won that championship without cheating. I think they probably would have. Last week, more than 3 years after those events, I read another article discussing that team and its legacy of cheating. Yes, they won. But that win is forever tainted. There is a cloud over the whole thing. They won’t be able to proudly talk in the future about that achievement, for they know that if it comes up there will be a “Yes, but…” reaction to it. Their names are forever connected with cheating, and that will go with them to their graves. In the short run they won, but in the long run they lost big time because they have been labeled cheaters. Today I want to talk about winning in life. For some wisdom on that let’s look at 1 John 5:1-5.

LOVE THE CHILDREN BY LOVING GOD

In verse 1 John restated some now familiar truth. The person who believes that Jesus is the Messiah is born of God. This goes back to the litmus test we saw in 4:2. “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” So by believing in Jesus we are born of God. Then John says “everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.”

I get this completely. When our kids were in their teen years there was a couple that Laurie and I really connected with. Their kids were close to ours in age. We really enjoyed this couple and it seemed they felt the same about us. But over several years we began to notice what seemed like an odd thing. This couple worked hard to foster a community of friends for their kids. But we noticed they kind of left our kids out of their circle of friends. They didn’t treat them poorly. They expressed some interest in them, but it became more and more clear that they didn’t include them in many of their activities. It wasn’t so overt that it was a problem, but to me it was noticeable, and I think our kids felt it. They didn’t reject or exclude our kids, but they didn’t make an effort to love them either. Eventually the couple kind of dropped us as friends. We didn’t have a falling out. There was no rupture in our relationship. They just sort of decided that our friendship wasn’t important to them anymore. It was kind of odd. As I looked back on that I realized I should have expected that. John is right, if someone loves the parent, they will love the child as well. If they don’t love the child much, they probably don’t love the parent all that much either. The couple’s sort of disinterest in our kids was a tip off that we didn’t matter that much to them and we should have expected that they would lose whatever interest they had in us as well.

Who is John talking about here? You might think this is about the Father and the Son, that it’s a trinity thing. But that’s not what John meant. John was referring to the Father’s adopted children, those adopted through faith in Christ. When you read on in verse 2 this becomes apparent, for John says, “This is how we know that we love the children of God.” This is about loving the children of God

Anyone who loves God will love his children, those who believe in Jesus. Again, this is a restatement of one of the big themes of this book. In 4:21 he wrote, “Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.” This is the same idea, and it was one that John wanted to heavily emphasize.

I find what John wrote in verse 2 to be surprising. It is not at all what I expected. What I expected is “this is how we know we love God, by loving the children of God.” That certainly is a principle John believed and taught as we have just seen. But that’s not what he says here. He says that the way we love the children of God is by loving God. Now I’m puzzled. How is loving God a way to love God’s children? Brilliant of you to ask that. It’s a very good question.

For all of us, when you blow away all the dust that accumulates as we go through life, there will be someone or something that we love more than anything else. There will be something or someone that we serve over everything else. There will be one thing that is more important to us than anything else, that one thing we will choose over everything, that we absolutely will not compromise for anything.

I’d like you to think about choosing that one thing or person like ordering in a restaurant. We sometimes envision this choice as being like a buffet restaurant. I realize that buffets have disappeared for the time being because of covid, but we’ve all eaten at a buffet restaurant at one time or another. About 14 or 15 years ago Laurie and I were on vacation on the island of Maui due to the generosity of a friend. This friend also gave us a gift certificate to the buffet at the Kapalua Bay Hotel, which no longer exists. We’d never been to this buffet, nor had we even heard of it. It turned out to be the best buffet I have ever been to. They had the buffet one night a week. They had a mind blowing spread, and all of it was delicious. There were so many mouth watering foods. They had some delicious fish, an awesome prime rib, lobster and many other entrees plus side dishes, salads, desserts and soups. I started off with salad and soup, a yummy clam chowder, and I had to restrain myself. I could have had so much of it I wouldn’t have been able to eat anything else. The cool thing was, I didn’t have to choose. I could eat as much of all of it as I wanted. Laurie loved having both lobster and prime rib.

Compare that to going to a more traditional restaurant. Perhaps it has a huge menu, one that is a bit overwhelming. But unless you are a glutton who will choose several entrees to gorge yourself on, you must choose one meal you are going to eat. We like to think of life as being like a buffet. We get to choose as much of whatever we want as we wish. However, when it comes down to that ultimate choice, it is like that menu. It appears to be very large, but you must select one thing off the menu. As it turns out, the menu of ultimate loves that we will love above everything else, is quite small. There are only two options on this menu.

The ultimate love menu looks like this: Option A – love yourself. Option B – love God. You will either love yourself more than anything else or you will love God more than anything else. There are many things that we might put in the category of an ultimate love, but in the end they turn out to be just variations on a theme. They are different ways to love yourself.

Option A is the human default. If you do not choose Option B, you are choosing Option A. In fact, at every moment of your life you are unconsciously being pulled to Option A, and without a conscious choice to do otherwise, you are choosing it. The big problem with Option A is when you are loving yourself, you are not loving others. You are taking care of you. You may do it in a way that looks like you are loving others, but you are really serving yourself.

I see this in interactions between our granddaughters. Toby and Anna are teaching them about sharing, but Cara has not really gotten the concept down yet. She’s still kind of in the “mine!” stage, which means she’s focused pretty much on Option A. If there is a toy that is up for debate and Cara is operating out of Option A, adult intervention will soon be needed. There will be rapidly escalating conflict. That is always what happens when one person in a relationship is functioning under the Option A plan, and it is as true for adults as it is for little kids.

Unfortunately it doesn’t help us much to say, “Don’t be selfish.” We just are. That’s how humans tend to work. In order for us to move out of the Option A plan we have to have something else to focus on. I have mentioned many times that I have an unfortunate weakness for doughnuts, and especially for the jelly doughnuts from Smith’s Bakery in Bakersfield. Sadly, odds are I will not have any more of those because we don’t get up to Bakersfield any more. But if you tell me, “Don’t think about those jelly doughnuts,” what will happen? I will say, “Okay, I won’t think about those doughnuts. But man, they are so good. Why doesn’t any other bakery in the world make doughnuts like that? I’ve never found another jelly doughnut that even gets close.” In other words, I’m thinking about jelly doughnuts. The only way to avoid that is to have something else to focus on. Perhaps you might say, “Rather than thinking about those jelly doughnuts, why don’t you think about the beignets you had at Café Du Monde in New Orleans.” Now I am thinking, “Wow, I’d love to have some of those beignets. Those things are absurdly good. You know, there is a little place up at Downtown Disney that has beignets that are just as good. We should go up there and get some of those.” I’m no longer thinking about jelly doughnuts. In other words, I need to replace what I was thinking about with something else.

Saying, “Don’t serve yourself,” won’t fix the problem. We must replace loving ourselves with loving God more. That’s why John tells us that the way that we love the children of God is that we love God. If we don’t love him, all we have is the default. We will love ourselves, but try to cleverly do it in ways that look like we are loving others. As we love God above everything else two things happen.

First, we are freed up from that obsession with self that causes us to operate in ways that instead of loving we actually are treating people in loving ways in order to get something from them. Second, we open up that channel for God’s unconditional love to flow through us to other people. So to sum up, as John says, the way we know we love God’s children is we love God first and foremost. That is what frees us up to love other people.

But what does it mean to love God?

DO WHAT GOD SAYS

Verse 3 says, “This is love for God: to keep his commands.” John seems to say that loving God boils down to doing what God tells us to do. In other words, it is a matter of obeying him. It is easy to see why John would say that, for that’s true in loving human beings. I’m going to wander out on some thin ice here. But I think this will illustrate the point. At the Christmas season we all receive Christmas cards, often from people we might only hear from occasionally, maybe even just once a year. The current trend is to include pictures of those sending the card, which I appreciate because I enjoy seeing people we don’t always get to spend time with. Among the cards we received this year was a picture of a couple we know that lives in a different area. The wife in this couple had a new hair style that was significantly different from what she’d had before. Laurie asked me what I thought of it. I didn’t like it at all. In fact, I hated it. I told her I’ve seen a number of women do what she had done and I don’t understand why that would do it. As part of that conversation I told her I really like her hair and the style she has and hoped she would never do anything like what our friend did.

Now imagine that she said, “So you really don’t like that style?” After I agreed that I did not like it at all, suppose she said, “Well, I can see why she would do that. I think it is smart. It would make life easier.” And suppose that she went out the next day and got her hair cut just like the woman in the picture. How do you think I would feel about that? The message would be loud and clear, “I don’t care what you think. I’m going to do whatever I choose.” In today’s culture, that is how the cultural elites think we should live. But something like that, which Laurie would never do by the way, communicates the opposite of love. Love says “I will do whatever is necessary to give up myself to do good for you.” Saying, “I’m doing what I want and what I think is best and I don’t care what you think,” is the antithesis of love.

I had a habit of leaving socks on the floor because maybe I might want to wear them again. That habit irked Laurie a little, so I make an effort not to do that. When a meal is done I make an effort to start doing the dishes and cleaning up the kitchen because I know that makes Laurie happy. Loving means not doing just what I want, but thinking about what makes the other person happy.

What John says here makes sense. If we love God, we will seek to do what he wants us to do, and will not do what he tells us not to do. We will seek to obey him. Laurie and I have a friend who claims to love God and talks a lot about love. The problem is that this person also lives in outright, militant rebellion against some things God clearly says. He has some religious feelings, but he’s not loving God because he’s refusing to do what God commands, and all of us know that is not loving someone. It is not loving another human being, and it is not loving God.

However, we must not think that love comes down solely to obeying God’s commands. That is a huge part of loving God, but not all of it. It is a necessary part of it, but it is not the sum total of it. We know that for two reasons. First, we can see that in what John says in verse 2. He says the way we know that we love the children of God is “by loving God and carrying out his commands.” Some people read that as though John said we love others by “loving God by keeping his commands.” But he didn’t say that. He said “and,” not “by.” The word “and” is very important there. John says there is loving God and there is keeping his commands. The two are not exactly the same thing. To love God is to have him as that most important thing in our hearts. It is to believe and to say to him that he has first place in our lives in everything. He is our first love. The logical result of that is that we will do what he commands. But it starts with that love in our hearts for him above all else. John says we need to both love God, and obey him.

The second reason we understand this is, once again, it is how love works in our human relationships. Suppose we boil love down to doing everything another person wants us to do. Imagine an employer hires a new person who turns out to be the ideal employee. This person works hard and does everything the boss wants him or her to do. Is that employee loving the boss? Actually we don’t know. They may or may not love the boss. They’re just doing their job to the best of their ability.

There is a component to love that is in our hearts. It is choosing the person loved above all else, it is affection for that person, it is appreciation, it is enjoying that person and it is desiring to be connected to that person. So loving God means that we choose him, we want to be with him, we appreciate him, we enjoy him and we have affection in our hearts for him. And, as we have just seen, choosing him above all else means doing what he wants.

The tendency is to reduce loving God to a list of tasks and rules. Notice that John says in verse 3, “his commands are not burdensome.” If all we have is commands and rules, that does become tiresome and dry. But that is not the life that God has called us to. Some people seem to think that the Christian life amounts to God saying, “here are a bunch of things you have to do, plus some things you’d better not ever do. You need to do better at doing all these things right.” But that is an exhausting way to try to live and it is guaranteed to result in failure and frustration. This is at odds with what Jesus said in Matthew 11:28. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.” The life Jesus came to bring us is not heavier and more exhausting. It should feel like rest. Yet we know that God does give us commands, and they are not necessarily easy to obey. How then does following Christ bring rest? Why are God’s commands not burdensome and tiring?

First, because obeying God is not the **prerequisite** for being loved by God, but the **result** of being loved by him. John has already made that point in 1 John 4:19 where he said, “We love because he first loved us.” If loving God involves obeying him, then that means we could also say, “we obey because he first loved us.” We don’t obey in order to get God to love us, but because he already has loved us even though we weren’t obeying him.

You can understand how important that is. How does it affect you if you have a relationship with someone that is dependent upon your performance? It is stressful and tiring. I once knew a guy whose dad was a baseball guy and wanted his son to be a great baseball player. This guy’s dad continually pushed him, as an athlete. He would critique him after every game, and he would point out every mistake, every failure. This guy was a terrific baseball player in high school and looked destined for great things. He had the ability. But the strangest thing happened. His performance really tailed off his senior year. It wasn’t that there was something wrong with him. He just got tired of having to perform for a dad who always found the negative. He began to dislike the game of baseball. His playing career ended when he graduated, and he was glad to be done with it. Having to earn love just grinds on us and wears us out. But that’s not how it works with God. He loves us. He doesn’t ask that we perform in order to win his good graces. He loves us first, then gives us commands that will help us live.

A second reason God’s commands are not burdensome shows up in Psalm 19:8. “The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.” David says those commands give us joy. In Psalm 119:14 David wrote, “I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.” Last year I watched a few minutes of a TV show called *The Wall*. It is a game show that features this big wall has slots along the bottom marked with a range of dollar amounts all the way up to $1 million. They drop these balls from the top of the wall and they randomly bounce through this maze on the wall to end up in one of those slots. The game is more complicated than just dropping the balls. It requires responding to questions correctly and avoiding losses of sums. But on the show I watched it got very tense, but in the end the woman contestant, on her last chance, won the top amount, $1 million. How do you think she responded? Was she nonchalant, saying, “Oh, well, that’s nice”? Was she upset, saying, “This is really going to complicate my life”? Was she disinterested, “No thanks, you can keep the money”? Uh, none of the above. She screamed, then she fell on the floor weeping for joy. She super rejoiced in the great riches she had just won. David claimed obeying God’s commands will produce a response somewhat like that. Why would God’s commands be joyful? There are a couple of reasons.

I have found that serving my wife is not hard. It is not a burden. It is a delight. Oh, it may not be my favorite thing in the world to do the dishes when I’m tired. It takes effort. But when I think I’m doing this because it will delight Laurie, it becomes a joy. It is not hard to do. It is a joy to do what will make Laurie happy because she loves me so unconditionally and because being married to her is such a huge blessing. That is how we obey God. We do it because he loves us so unconditionally and because knowing him is such a blessing.

Part of the reason keeping God’s commands is joyful is because of what it produces. Why does God tell us how to live? Is it because he wants to make life hard for us? Is it because he just likes to make us jump through hoops? Let’s remember that God loves us, more than any other person ever has or ever will love us. When you love someone more than you can ever express, if you tell them they should do something, what is your motive? You want good for them. When we were raising our kids we told them continually, “Brush your teeth before bed.” Did we do that because we got glee out of making them do stuff, because we just wanted to give them more things to do? No, we did it because we wanted them to have healthy teeth. We wanted good for them. That’s God’s motive. He wants us to experience good. He wants us to have life. Jesus said he came that we might have life to the fullest. That is why he tells us how to live. It is in obeying God that we experience life to the fullest possible extent. That’s why it is a joy to obey him. When we disobey him all we do is lessen good in our lives, drain joy from them, and experience less true life.

BE A WORLD BEATER

Laurie and I use some exercise videos that are on line. There is a married couple that produces a number of videos that we like to use. One thing that I find a tad annoying about them is the husband has a tendency to preach. He doesn’t preach on spiritual topics, but on physical ones. He tries to encourage viewers, but I don’t find it especially helpful. On more than one occasion I’ve heard him say, “Just by being here you are a winner.” I think he has a weak sauce definition of being a winner. It feels a bit like those kids sports programs where everyone is a winner just because they show up and they all get participation trophies. Do you know what happens to those trophies? They get thrown out eventually because they don’t mean anything. If everyone is a winner, then no one really is a winner.

All of us would like to be winners. Who wants to be a loser? No one. But that raises the question of who is a winner? What does winning in life mean? How do we define what it means to win? In verses 4-5 John says, “Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.” He is calling us to victory, to be winners, people who overcome or defeat the opposition.

This is not the only passage of Scripture that calls us to be winners. Romans 8:37 after mentioning trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and the sword Paul says, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” A conqueror is one who defeats the enemy, who wins the battle. He is a winner. Paul says we are more than winners through Christ.

There are a couple of misconceptions common among Christians about what it means to overwhelmingly conquer and to win in life. One of them is that we come out on top, that we succeed. We don’t lose in the world. But notice, that is actually defining winning in the same way the world does. That should give us a clue that this cannot be right. Another misconception is that we are always victorious, meaning never discouraged, never down, always on top and happy. But that is not realistic. No one is like that. That encourages us to live in denial and to pretend that we are always happy and on top, so that can’t be right either because God doesn’t call us to be phony, which is another word for dishonest.

What does it mean to win in life then? Pay attention to what John says. He says by our faith in Jesus Christ we have beaten the world. The world, as John uses it here, is the system of the world that is designed and controlled by Satan. It is designed to do two related things: to separate us from God, and to destroy us. By separating us from God it cuts us off from the source of true life, thus achieving both goals. John says that by putting our faith in Christ we have defeated that system. We are connected to God, not cut off from him, and as a result of that we experience real life. We have the life described by the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience. We get that by trusting in Jesus, and when we live like that we defeat the world.

When Laurie and I got married there were a few people who did not think it was a good idea. That was understandable. Laurie was 19! The guy she was marrying was far from the obvious pick for her for a variety of reasons. There was reason to think that a couple of years down the road she would wake up and think, “What have I done?” Laurie and I have won out over the doubters. We have overcome them. We have done so by having a blast loving each other and being gleefully married to each other for more than 41 years. Our victory was in living in the love we have for each other.

In Christ we can have that kind of victory. We can defeat the world that wants to separate us from God and ruin us. We put our faith in Christ, we walk in his Spirit and experience living connected to God, having the life to the fullest Jesus came to bring, and we win. We more than conquer. Living life in Christ as God desires for us is the victory. When we live that life of love, joy, peace, hope, meaning and glory to God, we win.

CONCLUSION

KNOW WHAT WINNING IS

We have a Star Wars monopoly game at our house. It’s Monopoly, but instead of having Ventnor Avenue, Park Place and Broadway, it has the ice planet of Hoth, Tatooine and the moon of Endor. Ella likes to play this game. But she has no concept of the real rules of the game. She creates her own. In her version, when she lands on a property she gets the deed to that property, but the main thing is to be the first to get all the way around the board. Money means nothing and she has no clue about building houses and hotels, it’s just about getting your game piece all the way around first. So we play, she thinks she’s won, and she has no idea that she actually never even played the game.

That can happen to people in life. They make up their own rules and have their own idea about what winning means, so they end up getting all the way around the board without ever having truly played the game of life, and they certainly haven’t won. I fear many will be dismayed to discover that they actually have lost big.

The Houston Astros thought winning was totally about defeating the other team whatever it took and getting the trophy at the end. In the short run they seemed to win. But in the long run, in the much larger arena of life, they lost and now likely regret that loss dearly. Our world tells us that winning is about having power, about having money, about status, about notice and approval of other people. It’s about having your desires being gratified and being “happy.” It doesn’t want us to see that there are people gaining all those things and discovering to their confusion and disappointment, that in fact, they haven’t won at all.

What is winning? It is living the life that the world system is designed to keep us from having. It is being vitally connected to God, being fully alive, having hope, being filled with joy and peace, being a channel of God’s love, and living for God’s glory, and doing that day in and day out no matter what our circumstances happen to be.

Years ago while driving to Bakersfield I realized that journey is a bit like life. To get to Bakersfield you have to drive over the Grapevine, the pass through the mountains between LA and Bakersfield. When you make that drive you have long stretches of significant uphill grades, then some downhill stretches, and some flat sections. At times they alternate, up for quite a while, then down, then back up as you go over ridges and valleys. I realized that’s how life is. You can’t get to the destination without going through all of it. There will be ups and downs, hard stretches, easy stretches, flat, boring stretches. We often think winning is being at the peak. But the truth is that winning is about living that life God has for us as we go through all of the ups, downs, and flat parts of life, as we inevitably must.

If you are in a tough, long pull right now, as many are, winning is living the life God has for you even in this time. If you are cruising down hill and life is a breeze, winning is living the life God has for you. If you are in a boring, dry section of life, winning is living that life of God. And when you reach the end of the road, winning is still living that life, as it will continue on into eternity.

KEEP CHOOSING THE RIGHT ENTRÉE

Winning begins with choosing the right entrée. It means not thinking life is a buffet and trying to eat as much of everything as we desire. It means being very clear that it is about loving God above all else. It is about living in his presence every day and pursuing him with all our heart. This is the key step to actually loving others, for if we don’t make this choice, we will inevitably choose Option A and love ourselves at the expense of others, and our souls will be strangled. We won’t live the life that is the big win we all want.

The problem for us that we visit this restaurant every single day and every day we must make a new choice. In fact, we keep making it all day long. Keep loving God above all else, for that is how we win.