

The Essentials of Born Again Living

1 John 5:1-5

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In his book, *Loving God*, Chuck Colson tells a story about a well-known celebrity gangster by the name of Mickey Cohen who went to a Billy Graham crusade, kind of as a lark. But while he was there, he was struck by the truth of the Gospel and supposedly trusted Jesus as Savior. He went through a spiritual journey, and the headlines in the newspapers said: "Mickey Cohen Finds Religion." For awhile, it appeared that there had been a genuine conversion experience. But through a series of events, Mickey Cohen finally concluded that he wanted to be both a Christian and a gangster. Do you think Mickey Cohen was truly born again?

While I was going to seminary I had a job driving a tow truck. One day I received a phone call from a gentleman who was visiting some people in our apartment complex. He was stranded about an hour away with his car broke down, so I went to pick him up. I hooked up his car and we had about an hour together in the truck, in which time he found out I was going to seminary. We started talking about the Bible and God, and it was obvious he had read the Bible and was very familiar with it. We talked about many things and I was pretty impressed. That evening, the people where he was staying threw a big party down in the courtyard. This same man was falling down drunk, cussing at the top of his lungs, taking the name of the Lord in vain. I thought, *That's quite a change from our ride this morning*. Do you think he was really born again?

President Clinton was a member of a Southern Baptist Church in Arkansas. I am convinced that he could articulate to you very clearly the truth of the Gospel. But his lifestyle certainly seems contrary to all of that. Do you think he is really born again? There are a number of athletes who were identified as evangelical Christians during their athletic careers. Now I see some of them on beer commercials. Are they born again, or aren't they?

Or let us just imagine Joe Schmo. You ask him the question, "If you were to die tonight, are you sure you would go to heaven?" And he says, "Yes." Then you ask him, "If God were to ask you why He should let you into heaven, what would your answer be?" He says, "Because Jesus died for me on the cross." But suppose there is absolutely no evidence of that in his life; he lives just like the rest of the world. Is he born again or not?

Over the last 20 years there have been a number of books which try to answer that question, with different theologians trying to draw a line in the sand somewhere, attempting to define "who is in" and "who is out." Frankly, I don't think we can know. My answer would be, "I don't know." I don't find anywhere in the Bible where God gives me the responsibility to try and determine who is in and who is out. I can't know that; only God can know that.

As a matter of fact, Jesus was very clear in saying that there are going to be tares among the wheat, and it is hard to tell the difference. He said, "Don't worry about it; I'll take care of it. When the harvest comes, I'll sort out the wheat from the tares. I'll sort out the true from the false." That's His job.

But Jesus did say there would come a day when people stand before Him and say, “Lord, Lord, didn’t I do this and this and this in Your Name?”—implying they are sure they are going to heaven. And Jesus will say, “Depart from me. I never knew you.” That’s rather sobering—to be absolutely convinced you’re going to heaven and to find out on that day that you are not. When Jesus said that, He didn’t say it would be a few, but *many*. He said, “Many will say to me on that day...”

I don’t think it is our business to try and figure out if everybody else is saved or not. God will have to take care of that. I do think we need to look at our own hearts, though, and examine within. Are we sure we really have been radically born again?

John has been talking about cultivating authentic Christian community, and one of the themes in his letter is trying to determine what it means to be authentically Christian. That is very important for Christian community. So John has been going through a process of trying to identify those who are truly the Body of Christ versus those who are not—those who are false teachers and need to be separated out. He has used very inclusive terms, such as “everyone.” It is not that *some* Christians should have this true of them, or *most*; it’s *everyone*. If you have been born again, this will be true of you. If it’s not true of you, then there has been no rebirth.

When he gets to 1 John 5:1-5, John begins to review where we have been, and he pulls things together in a summary fashion. He has talked about three essential ingredients which will be part of the life of someone who has been born again. It’s not that those three ingredients should be or could be; but it’s that they *will be*. They are the identifying marks—the ingredients to born again living.

But before we look at 1 John 5:1-5, let’s go back to the beginning of the letter and review where we have been on these three ingredients. As I studied verses 1-5 in chapter 5, I found myself needing to go back and remember what we have learned, in order to understand these verses.

One of the major themes that has emerged out of John’s letter is this concept of “born again”—those who are “born of God.” We are so familiar with that terminology that, in some ways, it becomes kind of cliché-like. But, again, we have to realize that the New Testament writers could think of no more radical terminology to describe what has happened to you than to say, “You have been absolutely born again—you’ve been born anew.” So the terminology is absolutely radical; and with that comes the understanding that there is something I once was, and that has been put to death, and I have been born again. I have an old nature—an old me—that has been put to death and now there is a whole, new, radical me. I now have the very nature of God and the very presence of God within me. Therefore, these ingredients are essential in living out that new life.

The first ingredient is *truth*. In 1 John 1:1-4, John talked about the truth concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. When we refer to the person, we are referring to who Jesus is—the eternal God, the second member of the Trinity, the Creator of the universe who had become flesh, fully God/fully man. That is what we mean by the term “person.” The “work” of Jesus Christ is what He did. He lived a perfect life; He was nailed to the cross for the sins of the world; He was buried, rose again, and ascended to the Father, and is coming again. That’s the meaning of the “person and work” of Jesus Christ.

The false teachers were denying things about Jesus, so John opened his letter by basically saying, “I want you to know I was there. I walked with Him. I talked with Him. I saw the miracles with my own eyes. I heard Him teach with His own lips. I saw Him crucified on the cross. I saw Him buried. I saw Him after He rose again. I saw Him ascend.” He is saying, “I’ve seen it all! I’m an eyewitness! These false teachers hadn’t been with Jesus. They didn’t see any of this. How would they know?” So John opens his letter by saying, “I know what’s true about the person and work of Jesus Christ.” He said, “I was there.” He is, in a sense, establishing some credentials here.

John then picks up the theme of truth again in 2:18 and runs that through verse 29. He talks about the anti-Christ, or the spirit of the anti-Christ, meaning those who are opposed to Jesus versus the true born-again Church. He says that the false teachers were saying they know God, but they were denying Jesus as the Son of God. John is very clear in saying that you can’t do that. If you deny Jesus you have no access to God. There is only one way and that is through Jesus. If you deny the Son you deny the Father.

But he also said that each of us who has trusted Jesus as Savior, who has been born again, has an anointing. The very Spirit of God now dwells within us and the responsibility, or the role, of the Spirit of God is to lead us to truth. (2:27) That Spirit will tell us what is true and what is a lie—that is why He is there.

John goes on in 4:1-6 to tell us we must test the spirits. Just because people say, “This is from God” doesn’t mean it is. John is saying, “Make sure you test the spirits, and make sure that true is true, as God has defined truth.”

The second ingredient he has talked about is what we call *righteousness*, which we could call obedience or dealing with sin. In 1:5, John reminded us that God is light; and when we live in community with one another, we live that community in the light, because Jesus is at the center of it. When we live in the light we expose one another’s sin, because that is part of what happens when we live in community. We see ourselves and our selfishness and our sins. At that point, we can either pull back into the darkness and say, “I have no sin,” or we confess that sin, knowing that He is “faithful and just to forgive that sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” As we live in community with one another in the light and we confess our sins, we become more like Jesus (1 John 2:6) and we will walk in the same manner as He walked.

In chapter 3:1-10, John picks up this theme again, saying we can distinguish between those who are children of the devil and those who are children of God by how we live in righteousness. He says, “No child of God can habitually sin as a pattern of life.” He doesn’t say that they *shouldn’t* do that; he says they *can’t*. It is just completely inconsistent with everything that is true of a child of God. We now have been made with a new nature, and it is the very nature of Jesus—the very presence of Jesus Himself. Understanding who Jesus is and that He died on the cross for the sins of the world, and all that He is about, we cannot live in a habitual pattern of sin. That would be so radically inconsistent with who we now are in Jesus.

Does that mean that Christians don’t sin? No, that’s not what it means. We do. We all do. But we confess that sin, and He forgives that sin. That is different than a habitual pattern of sin where there is no conviction and no confession.

The third ingredient he talks about is the ingredient of *love*. John picks that up in 2:7 when he reminds us of a “new old command.” It is old because God’s people have always been called to love. But it is new because we can love at a whole new level, because now we have the very nature of Jesus within us and we have the presence of His Spirit within us. We can love in a way we never could have loved before.

John continues that discussion in 3:11-24 when he again says the way we can tell the difference between the children of God and the children of the devil is by the way that we love. He uses Cain as a model of what we were before Christ. We were enslaved to our sinful nature. We were selfish to the core to the extent that, if we had to, we would sacrifice others in order to benefit ourselves. That is the ultimate act of selfishness.

He uses Christ to represent the radical change. “No longer are you in bondage to selfishness, but now you can live selfless, represented by Christ, who was willing to sacrifice Himself for the benefit of others.” It is as opposite as it could be. In that section of Scripture, John speaks to the fact that, even though we now have this new nature and the longing of our hearts should be to love as Jesus loved, we don’t always live that way. But when we fail to live that way, our heart condemns us. We aren’t satisfied with that and we don’t want to live that way. I don’t want to be selfish. I want to be selfless. I want to be like Jesus. I don’t want to sacrifice others to benefit me. I will sacrifice myself to benefit others. John says that actually is a sign that something has changed. People who are enslaved to their sin nature are selfish to the core, but they don’t even know it. They live out their selfishness in darkness. But once we begin to realize that something has radically changed, and the desire of our heart is to love like Jesus, that is an evidence that something at our core has changed.

John talks about love one more time in 4:7. He reminds us that this God, and His nature and love which now dwells within us, is the very love that caused God to send His own Son to die on a cross for the sins of the world. Since that is the nature that now dwells within us, that love ought to manifest itself in our lives; and by that, people will look at us and they will see the truth of the Gospel. They will see it is true that God sent His Son to be the Savior of the world.

One of the questions we would ask is: Why has John organized his material the way he has? Just in going through the review, it is obvious that he hasn’t given *all* of his discussion on truth, then *all* of his discussion on righteousness, followed by *all* of his discussion on love. Rather, he keeps going in what we have defined as a spiral. He talks about these three ingredients; and then he comes back and talks about them again. Then he goes around and talks about them once again. Why does he do that?

I think the answer is found in 5:1-5, and that is because the three ingredients are just that. That word is carefully chosen because “ingredient” implies something that is stirred together, and at that point it becomes one. You can’t take ingredients in a recipe, stir them together, and then pull them out again. Once they are stirred together, it all becomes one. That is exactly what John is saying. These three ingredients are so essential to born again living that you can’t really separate them or pull them out. They just blend together and become one, and that *one* is the very nature of God. What better way to do that than to keep going around in this spiral? It almost creates a stirring effect, doesn’t it? He just keeps blending them together, saying these three ingredients are all together—they’re one. And that becomes quite clear in these verses.

1 John 5:1: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” The word “whoever” is all-inclusive. He is defining those who are part of the family of God; and it is those who believe that Jesus is the Christ. We have mentioned before that Christ is not His last name. It is a title meaning that He is the Anointed One, the Messiah. Take all of the theology in the Old and New Testament concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ, and it all really comes together and is a part of that title—the Christ. So it is everything we believe about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

“Whoever believes that...” The word “believe” doesn’t mean intellectual; it does not mean an ability to recite the information. The Greek word means to trust, or we might say to embrace. It means to reach out and embrace the truth concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. We’ve embraced that. We now place our trust in it, and live out this new born again life in Christ. Whoever does that, he says, is born of God.

Now look closely at the words that John uses, because what he is *not* saying in this particular case is that because you believed in Jesus Christ you are born of God. Even though that is a true statement, that is not what he is saying here. Rather, he is saying that your belief is a result of having been born again. Look at the grammar: “Whoever believes...” It is not past tense...it’s not whoever *believed* in the past. Rather, it’s a present-tense verb meaning “Whoever is currently believing this (what we are believing right now) is born of God.” That is what we call an aorist perfect verb. It means that is something which has happened in the past (I was born of God), but the perfect tense is that it has ongoing results or effects today. So, in the past, I was born of God. But the effects are present tense, and those effects are that I am believing.

So here is what it means in simple terms: When I was born again, I took on the very nature of Jesus; His Spirit dwells within me; and Jesus knows what is true about Himself. Jesus is not going through a personality crisis where He is trying to find Himself. He knows who He is, and He knows what is true about Himself. Therefore, His Spirit within us, His nature within us, tells us this is true... this is true... this is not true... this is not true... because He knows. He knows what is true about Himself. John is saying that because I have been born of God, it is on that basis, then, that I believe what is true.

Christmas is a great time of year to make that point. I have always been impressed with the rich theology in the Christmas carols. They’re wonderful; yet, people sing them all the time and don’t have a clue what it means. They set up nativity scenes but don’t know the real meaning. They watch all the specials on television, and they just don’t get it. One of the reasons is that, when you are born again, you are now looking at it through different lenses. It is the very nature of Jesus within you that connects with what is true and says, “This is true... this is true...this is false...this is false.”

We could go into any culture in the world today and find people who are born again, and we would all be in absolute agreement concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. I know people today say there is all this confusion about who Jesus is, and I’ll agree with you, in the religious world that is true. But among the camp of those who are truly born again, that is not true. We are all very clear on who Jesus is and what He did for us. When we’re born again, it is His very presence within us that says, “This is true of me.” That is an identifying mark—an essential ingredient of what it means to be born again. After all, how could God be confused about who He is? How could God be confused about the truth of His person and

work? It's not possible. So there is a commitment of value to truth that sets us apart as His people.

“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.” John is just blending these two together, and they are part of one sentence. He says that whoever loves the Father loves His children. He doesn't say, “Whoever loves the Father *should* love His children.” It is not *should*, but it is that they *do* love. How could you love the Father and not love His children when it is the very presence of God in His children that connects us together? If you love His children, you are loving God. If you love God you love His children. You can't separate that out.

Think of it this way: How could God not love Himself? Is God having some sort of a crisis where He doesn't love Himself? God dwells within you. God dwells within me. How could God not love Himself? You love the Father... you love His children. We are all connected because it is God's nature. It is God's Spirit.

How do we love one another? Verse 2: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.” Do you know how I should love you? I love you by loving God and obeying Him. That is what John is saying. How do we love each other? By loving God and obeying Him. Why? Because the nature of God is in you; the presence of God is in you. When I love and obey God, I'm loving you.

Another way to think of it is that, because God's nature and God's presence dwells within me, when you sin you not only offend God, but you offend me, because you're offending now that new nature within me. You are offending God within me; so when you offend God, you offend me. When you obey God, you are loving me.

John is saying we are so tied together because of this common nature and this common presence of God that you really can't even separate out our love for God and our love for God's people. He told us that in 1 John 1:3. He said that when you dwell in community with the Father, you are in community with the people of God, because the people of God are filled with the presence of God.

But he says these commands of God are not burdensome. They're not a weight around our neck. It is not something we do because we have to. It is something we do because we want to. That's our nature. The longing of our nature and the passion of our hearts now is to be like God. If it's God's nature in us, how could God be out of alignment with Himself? How could God not want to carry out His own will? So, now what is at my core, my nature, is that I want to obey God. I want to delight in His presence. I want this to be a love relationship. He told us that in chapter 4 when he said this shouldn't be a relationship of fear. I should not do what I do because I'm fearful that God is going to step in and “get me” if I don't.

Think that through. Is God really afraid of Himself? Is God within me afraid that God is going to do something to Himself? That makes no sense. The very nature and presence of God is in alignment with God; therefore, that is what I want to do. That is what Paul said in Romans 7. The very thing that sometimes I want to do, I don't do. Sometimes our flesh leads us astray and we get out of alignment. But still, at the core, what we want is what God wants, because that is our nature. His commands are not burdensome.

A professor from Wheaton College writes these words:

Last spring I was explaining to an introductory New Testament class Paul's view of grace as it appears in Galatians. Paul shares John's opinion that it was God's love expressed in Christ that inspires the Christian life. In fact, as Paul argued in Romans 7, law by itself simply triggers rebellion.

Then I tried an experiment. I asked all forty students to write a one-page essay analyzing whether their lives had been shaped by the threat of law or the wonder of God's grace. I was devastated by the results. Over 90 percent of the class admitted privately that the possibility of God's disfavor and wrath had shaped their Christian outlook since childhood. God's unending love was not foremost in their minds, but his possible displeasure was. Christianity, they reported, was *really about following the rules*. When I told them it was not, you could hear a pin drop. Some privately commented that this was the first time they had heard such "good news."

The following was written by a 21 year-old student who is a strong, knowledgeable evangelical. Her sentences were submitted in a term paper describing the justice of God:

I feel like God punishes me for sins all of the time. I feel that there is always something I am being punished for. I know that it is impossible because there are not enough minutes in the day for God to punish us. I probably should not call it punishment, but that is the way I feel about God's justice. I know of God's love and blessings for me and for that I am eternally grateful and thankful. But I live with this fear that one mess-up and I will be punished again.

- Gary Burge, *NIV Application Commentary, Letters of John, p. 195*

If that describes your relationship with God, something is really wrong. Somewhere along the way, you have been convinced of something that simply isn't true. It makes no sense. How could the very nature of God within you be afraid of God? There is a connection there. There should be a connection of love, a connection of celebration, a connection of the longing and passion of my heart to obey and walk in alignment with Him. He told us that this relationship is not about fear—it is about love.

Verse 4: "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" John has gone full circle. He has gone through all three ingredients and is back to the first one again—the truth concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ (end of verse 5).

John really likes this word "overcome." He has used it many times in his letter, and he uses it three times in these two verses. He is talking about the fact that if you are born of God you will overcome the world. It doesn't say that you might or you should... but that you will. He told us in chapter 3 that if you are born of God, one day when you see Him as He is, you will be like Him—not might be, not could be, but you *will be*. There are no spiritual failures in the family of God. If you truly have been born again, He will get you there. John is saying once more that you will overcome on the basis of what is true within you.

What causes you to overcome is not you, but it is what is now *in* you. That is why, in verse 4, he says "whatever" and not "whoever." If you have an NIV, it says whoever, which is incorrect. It is not a whoever; but it is a neuter pronoun—"whatever." The reason is because John is not talking about you. John is making the point that it is not you who will

overcome; it is what's in you that is going to overcome. It is the very presence of God—the very nature of God. It's now what he calls your faith that has radically transformed you, and it's on the basis of that that you will overcome.

Probably the overwhelming majority of you look inside and you see these ingredients: that God is at work and God is changing your life. There's every reason to celebrate that and to realize that you have been changed so remarkably and you are becoming like Jesus. You're not going to get part-way there; you're going to get there. You look in your life and you say, "I do see this commitment to truth and I understand the person and work of Jesus Christ." God has affirmed that message and it's clear, and that's important to you. You see this love relationship between you and God; and His commands are not burdensome, but they're really what your heart desires and what you want. You see God beginning to work His love through you.

Sometimes we do act selfishly, but we know that's not what we want. That's not what we're going to settle for, because God has radically changed us and we are on a different path. We understand this concept of righteousness—the importance of obeying and confessing our sin and seeking to be like Jesus. You see these ingredients in your life and you can see that God is doing a remarkable thing. You can walk away with a smile on your face, realizing that you've been radically changed and God is at work.

But there are some of you, when you look in your life, who are wrestling with some questions. You say, "I have to be honest. I don't see much of this in my life. I'm so confused about Jesus and these God-things that I don't understand what's true." As a matter of fact, maybe you haven't even cared. Maybe you say, "You know, that hasn't even really been very important to me." You really don't see much love. You see a lot of selfishness and you think, *I'm basically willing to sacrifice others if I need to for myself and that's how I live.* You've never really thought that much about it, and you basically live your life your own way. There is a habitual pattern of sin and you just do your own thing.

Maybe what motivates you is fear. You are a religious person and you are sure you need to be religious or God is going to zap you or one of your kids. But, maybe for the first time, you are realizing that's not what it's all about at all. You've never really entered into a born again life, where God has replaced that sinful nature with a new divine nature—His very presence—which will change your life in ways you can't even begin to imagine, both in this life and for eternity.

This is a great time of the year to think about these things—about what really matters. Maybe this will be the first time that you really have understood that you've never been born again, and you will invite Jesus to be your Savior and be radically changed forever. It is something to think about.

Our Father, we are thankful for what Christmas is really all about. You sent your Son to be the Savior of the world. Not that we could be changed a little, but that we would be radically changed—completely reborn. Lord, I pray for those who have never been born again. Perhaps they have been very religious, but they have never really experienced what it means to be born anew—to have the very nature of God—the very presence of Jesus—within them. Lord, speak to their hearts in a way that only you can. May this be their hour of salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.