

## Overcoming the World

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 John 5:1-5

*“Everyone who is born of God overcomes the world.”* That’s an amazing statement when you think about it. Whoever is born of God overcomes the world; has a kind of victory over the world! Can this possibly be true? Do we really believe this? In one of his books, Philip Yancey admits that, like the rest of us, he will occasionally wrestle with doubt about such things. “For example, I stand in the futuristic Denver Airport,” he writes, “watching important-looking people in business suits, briefcases clutched at their sides like weapons. [They] pause at an espresso bar before scurrying off to another concourse. ‘Do any of them ever think about God?’ I wonder.” You can see what he means. A major international airport is like a theater of success, a place where you can see the powerful of the world in action. You sit there waiting for your plane and beautiful people whose eyes sparkle with intelligence and purpose sweep by you. They are talking forcefully to someone on their cellphone. They have the Wall Street Journal under their arm. They get on planes to New York and London and Tokyo. In Tom Wolfe’s words, they look like Masters of the Universe. They look like overcomers. They look like conquerors.

Compare the corporate flash of the airport to the reality of the church. Even in America where the church is relatively strong, most churches are small and struggling. The median Sunday morning attendance in America? 79 people. 59% of American churches have less than a hundred people on Sunday morning. The majority of American churches are tiny, struggling little bodies with half-empty pews: think of the little storefront churches you see when you drive through the inner city, think of those tiny white sided churches you see out in the middle of a cornfield in the country. In her book “Holy the Firm”, Annie Dillard describes going to a church in the Pacific Northwest while she was writing there. It was one of those white frame country churches. There would be 20 people in the crowd on Sunday morning, and she was the only person under 60. There was an altar in front of the church that was beige and looked like it was made of linoleum. The music in the church was dreadful: an off-key soloists singing a secular song about mountains. The whole thing was less than mediocre. In so many places in America, in so many places in the world, this is the church. This is what the community of faith looks like, this is what the body of Christ looks like, this is the reality, and the contrast with the airport masters of the universe could not be more striking. When you look at it, it seems as though the church is barely holding itself together.

And yet John says, “Whoever is born of God overcomes the world.” John says, “This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.” John says, “Who is it that overcomes the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” Do we believe that?

We find this hard to believe sometimes because our mind has been shaped to think of success in a certain way. Every day we are exposed to a mythology of success and that mythology shapes our definitions. The mythology comes at us from all sorts of places. The infomercial for the weight loss program has the testimonial from the person who was lost 80 pounds. “I went from a size 18 to a size 6,” she says, “and I feel like a new person.” In the middle of her testimonial she starts to cry: “I have so much more confidence, I’m not afraid to go to the beach with my children, people look at me differently and it’s changed my life. I’m so happy.” We hear her story and we think, ‘Wow! She’s thin and beautiful now. She’s conquered.

She's overcome.' We learn to associate success with thin and beautiful. Or we see the sports story about the team which overcame the odds, and overcame all the nay-sayers and made it to the championship game. And there, under the glare of pressure, under the media spotlight, with everything on the line, they triumphed! They won the championship. We see that and we think they conquered, they overcame! We learn to associate success with winning, being number one. Or we see the young member of our congregation who left Grand Rapids and went off somewhere else for his new job, his new career and he comes back at Christmas time for a visit and something has changed. He just got a promotion at work – making 6 figures now, and he's sharply dressed and handsome, he's driving a nice new car, and when you talk to him he looks you in the eye and his handshake is firm. You remember the shy, awkward pimply faced kid that you used to know and you think to yourself, "Man that kid has really made it!" We associate success with professional accomplishment and wealth.

Now, of course, there is nothing wrong with any of these three scenarios. All of these people have done something admirable and positive. Getting a good job, losing weight through self-discipline, winning a championship, there is nothing remotely sinful about any of these things. There is a real sense in which all of these people have overcome. But it's a very specific kind of success. And living under these kinds of success stories, being bombarded by these kinds of success stories, it trains us, it indoctrinates us in a certain definition of success. Put these success stories together and you have a kind of mythology of success that trains us to associate success with things like beauty, wealth and power. It gets so that we can't imagine conquering or success or overcoming in any other terms than these.

Sometimes this version of success gets so ingrained in us that we even let it apply to the church. The big church with the balanced budget and the fancy programs, the church with the amazing music program and the wonderful choir, the church with the whiz bang preacher, and the tight liturgy, the church that has all those important people in it, those doctors and lawyers and businessmen – that's a successful church, that church is overcoming! The little half empty church with the old ladies and the mediocre pianist and the linoleum altar – that's a struggling church. I understand this way of thinking. And I fully admit that given a choice I'd rather be in a growing church with good preaching, music and liturgy than a little struggling church of 50 people. But the truth is that this kind of success has very little to do with the sort of success and excellence that John holds up in his letter. When John talks about a faith that overcomes the world, he says nothing about growth or wealth or liturgical excellence. John's focus is on three things: love, obedience and belief. He focuses on love in verses 1 and 2. He focuses on obedience in verse three and he focuses on belief at the end of our passage. Faith that has love and obedience and belief conquers the world. You don't measure success by biggest, best and most beautiful; you measure it by love, obedience and belief. It is an entirely different way of measuring your life. Let me briefly lay out what John specifically means by these three ways of conquering.

By love John means love of your neighbor, and especially love of your fellow church members. The success question here is: "Do we know each other and care for one another in the church?" John spent all of chapter 4 emphasizing this issue: "Beloved, let us love one another because love comes from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." In chapter 4 he also describes the kind of love he wants us to show to each other and it's the sacrificial, dying on the cross sort of love of Jesus. So a church where the people sacrificially care for one another, a church where people look out for one another and support one another and pray for one another: that's a conquering church. Now under this version of success, which is more

successful: a tiny country church of 20 people, 19 of them over 60 or a 5000 member mega church? All of a sudden it's not so easy to tell, is it? When love of your brothers and sisters is the standard for success then maybe you measure success not by the size of the budget, but by the number of casseroles made and the number of cards sent per capita.

John also holds up obedience as a standard for a conquering church. Here the success question is: "are we following God's law for our life even when it's inconvenient or painful?" "In fact this is love for God: to keep his commandments." Throughout this letter John has been urging the church to obey God's commands. It's the first thing he talks about: "If we say we have no sin the truth is not in us, if we confess our sin he will cleanse us from unrighteousness." Maybe you remember those words from chapter one. A conquering church humbly and faithfully tries to follow the ways of Jesus Christ her Lord. When we humbly and in a Spirit of Love, do God's will in his world despite opposition, we overcome. I read a story in Christian Century a while back about exactly this sort of conquering – it's a story that the kids here could relate to. A seventh grade girl, a Christian, was part of her school's track team. She was tall and she loved to run. One Saturday, because of the weather, her track meet was postponed to the following week. Unfortunately the time for the meet was scheduled at the same time as a church commitment. Months ago she had promised to go on a mission trip with her youth group. She was going to spend the day helping people with her church. The girl went to her track coach to tell her about the problem. She was hoping the coach would let her go on her mission trip. But the coach said: "Your teammates are counting on you. You can't let them down. I expect you there for the meet." She went home that night in tears. The next day she went to her coach again to ask for the day off. This time the coach said, "You are either here for the meet or you turn in your uniform." More tears that night. The next day she brought her uniform to her coach, gave it to him and walked away. This girl wasn't going to win any championships, she wasn't going to get any medals, and she gave up the chance for a certain kind of success. But this girl is a conqueror. In John's way of measuring things, in God's way of measuring things she was obedient and that's what overcomes the world.

Finally John calls us to belief. The success question here is: "Do you live your life every day before the face of Jesus?" "Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the son of God." Belief in Jesus, confessing Jesus' name, holding on to Jesus is emphasized throughout this letter. And that means a person who is faithful in prayer, a person who gets up in the morning and turns her heart towards Jesus saying 'Lord, show me the way today,' a person who in the midst of her busyness and fatigue comes to worship with God's people every week and listens for Jesus' direction, that person is a conqueror. And so when that kid comes back from the city all successful looking with the nice suit and the nice car and the 6 figure income, all that stuff is well and good, but the real measure of things is: who is Lord of all this "success"? Is he still connected to Jesus? Does he seek Christ's face in the morning and in the evening? Does he seek first Jesus' kingdom and his righteousness? In John's horizon, in God's horizon, that's what really matters.

Love, obedience, and belief: live every day with these in your life and you will be a conqueror; you will overcome the world. Conventional success is nice, but ultimately it has limited staying power. Beauty fades. The great sports championship is quickly forgotten. The trappings of success, the really nice car, the snappy outfit – they make you feel good for a little while, but the excitement wears off with astonishing speed. The things you do out of love and obedience and belief – those things don't fade. Those things are of eternal value. With every casserole you make for a sick neighbor, with every prayer you say at the start of your day, with

every commandment you obey in the face of opposition, you do something eternal. Do these things and, bit by bit, you become the person you will be forever in the new creation.

It shouldn't surprise any of us that this is the way God measures success. After all we follow the one who conquered by dying on a cross. The crucifixion was Jesus' glory according to the gospel of John. It wasn't failure; it was his moment of final success. And we follow the one whose great invasion of the earth took place in a stable. Jesus didn't even make the birth notices in the local papers. But this birth, this small anonymous arrival in the stable has become the most important birth in the history of the world. If you had been there on that day walking by the stable all you would have seen was: one faithful, loving, obedient man, one faithful, loving, obedient woman and a squalling infant taking his first breath. It would have looked like less than nothing. But of course it wasn't nothing; it was everything. Looking at him, we know that whoever is born of God conquers the world.

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