

“The Trajectory of Life”
1 John 4:13-5:5
August 17, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

Throughout his letter, John has been discussing three tests to be used to determine if someone is a true Christian or not. There is the doctrinal test of belief in Jesus as the Son of God, the social test of love and the ethical test of obedience to God’s commands. What he does in today’s passage is to talk about all three of these tests together, noting their relationship to one another. John’s main point is that they are a unified whole. In other words, no one has only one or two out of the three. Everyone has either none of these or all of these.

Another way of looking at these three tests is to see them as describing the trajectory of the Christian’s life. If you pass these three tests, the trajectory of your life will be a good one. It is important to recognize that life is always lived as a trajectory, not as isolated events. The most important thing isn’t the speed at which you live life, but the direction of one’s life. Life is like a golf putt. Have you ever seen a golfer bending his body after striking the putt and watching it travel toward the cup. He will bend his body in the way he wants the putt to go, or sometimes even talk to the ball. Of course, all such efforts are wasted. The time of his influence on the ball was limited to the two factors of the direction and the force of the putter striking the ball. Once the ball is struck and the trajectory is set, he has no further control. Life is very much like that, and one way we can look at these three tests is to see them as a description of the trajectory of a well-lived life.

Like many of you, I was shocked and saddened to hear this week of the suicide of Robin Williams. He was such a gifted comedian and actor, but, it seems now, also a man tormented by significant depression and despair. I know very little about Williams, but I do know that none of us wants our lives to end like that. While I recognize that there are sincere and mature Christians who battle significant depression, I also know that the trajectory of their lives is such that, as they avail themselves of the resources provided to us in the gospel, they end in a different place. So let’s look today at the trajectory of the life of the Christian who passes these three tests.

I. A Trajectory that Ends Well

Life, as in golf, needs to start with the end in view. You decide how to start by fixing clearly in your mind where you want to end. Where does a life of faith, love and obedience lead? John gives two answers to that question in our text.

The first answer is repeated three times in the first three verses of our passage. **“We abide in him and he in us”** (2:13, 15, 16). To abide means to live with God. We were created for intimate and deep fellowship with God, and, as Augustine said, we will always be restless until we find our rest in him. One of the differences between visiting in someone’s house and living in that house is that you don’t have to knock on the door of the house you live in. You are always welcome to walk right in because it’s your house. Amazingly, such access is given to us. We are welcome in God’s house because we’re family. We abide in him.

The second answer to this question of where a life of faith ends is found in verses 17-18. We have **“confidence for the day of judgment.”** He goes on to say that there is **“no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment.”** The fear this verse is talking about is the fear of judgment. The Bible speaks repeatedly of a great day of judgment that is to come. It is not a metaphor. It is not a manipulative invention to motivate people to behave themselves. It is a reality that Jesus warned about more than anyone else in the Bible. Jesus himself will be the judge on that great day, and he will judge in truth. No secret thought, deed or word will remain hidden. All words spoken in private will be made public. Nor is there a statute of limitations on the sins to be judged. The passage of time may cause the memory of sin to fade in your mind, but not in the mind of the Judge on that day. No wonder John brings up the topic of fear. Who wouldn’t be filled with fear on such a day? I will tell you. Those whose lives have been built on this foundation of faith, love and obedience will have confidence on this day. Their confidence will be based on God’s love for them in Christ. When they look at the Judge they will see none other than the one whose blood has covered their sin. Since their appeal to him will be based on the blood he shed for the express purpose of cleansing their sin, their claim for pardon will be ironclad.

II. A Trajectory Begun by God

We’ve seen where this life leads that is characterized by the three tests of faith, love and obedience John mentions repeatedly in his letter. Where does such a life begin? Many think that the answer is that such a life begins with our faith, when we first come to trust Jesus. John says that something happens before that. The verbs in 5:1 are very significant. **“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.”** This teaches clearly that believing is the consequence of the new birth, not its cause. In other words, before one can believe, he or she must be born again. Theologians refer to this by saying that regeneration (being born again) always precedes faith. John says the same thing in the previous chapter when he says, **“We love because he first loved us”** (4:19). If sin renders us spiritually dead, then it makes sense that regeneration must precede faith. It is similar to the moment

of Lazarus' resurrection. Jesus said to him, "Lazarus, come forth." But since a dead man can't hear, Jesus had to give him life before he could hear the command of Jesus and respond. This doesn't mean that the person who comes to Christ doesn't make a choice to do so, only that before he chooses God, God must choose him and give him a new life. God is in the driver's seat, not man.

This challenges the response some want to make to Jesus' offer of the gospel. Some want to script out the time of their response, saying, "I'll spend the first forty years of my life doing what I want, and then I'll come to Christ." To say that is to put your will above God's will. Those who are truly born again do not elevate themselves above God like that. Here's a good test to know whether or not you are born again. If you are not born again, the idea of God's sovereignty, of his will being ultimate over yours, just makes the unregenerate angry. Those who are born again, on the other hand, respond to this by emptying their hands, even their own will, and simply calling out to God for mercy. You cannot come to God with anything in your hands, even your own will that reserves to yourself when and how you will respond to God. As the hymnwriter, Augustus Toplady said, "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to thy cross I cling."

III. A Trajectory that Requires Commitment

I notice that all three of these tests require commitment. You can't believe, love or obey unless you are willing to be "all in." All three are analogous to taking a trip on an airplane. You can't fly somewhere while keeping one foot on the ground. You're either all in or you're out. Faith is that way. Faith believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. If you believe that, then it requires submitting to Jesus as God. You can't say both "Jesus is God," and "In this one area of my life, I think I would rather do what I want to do than what Jesus wants me to do." To say the latter is to put yourself and your will above that of Jesus.

It's the same with love. To love someone is to be "all in" without holding back. Suppose you're in bed one night and your husband wakes up with severe chest pains. You immediately call 911, but then you have to think about what to do with your young children who are asleep in their beds. You call a church friend for help, and the friend won't do anything more than offer advice and prayer. Your friend says, "Oh, I can't come now. I've got an important early morning meeting and I need my sleep. I would recommend calling the pastor. I love you and I'll pray for you. Goodnight!" There is a type of reckless commitment involved in loving others, a drop-everything-and-help kind of love. It's the love of Jesus, a love that didn't offer advice from a distance, but entered into our messy worlds with a reckless commitment.

Obedience to God's commands also requires an "all-in" commitment. One way to view obedience is to see it as willingly limiting your options. When you obey God by being faithful in marriage, you are limiting your options for romance with every other person on the planet. When you obey God by telling the truth, you limit yourself to the reality that is, rather than attempting to create the reality you would like there to be. When you obey by not stealing, you limit yourself to what God has chosen to give you. We live in a day when people want to keep open all their options as long as possible, never committing to anything. Such a life puts you on the wrong trajectory, one that ends in misery. One of the paradoxes of Christianity is that the trajectory of life that brings freedom is the one in which you limit your options rather than keeping them all open. You commit to the path of obedience and accept the limitations inherent in such a path.

IV. A Trajectory that Overcomes the World

Three times in verses 4-5 John uses the word "overcome" in the promise that we overcome the world. It's a word that assumes we will be in a fight with an enemy that wants to overcome us. This enemy will not be able to do so, but instead will find itself overcome by us. And what is the secret to our ability to overcome? It is not our great power, but our faith. **"This is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith"** (5:4). Faith looks to God's strength because it knows of our weakness. It says with King Jehoshaphat when he faced the coalition armies from the south, **"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you"** (2 Chron. 20:12).

What are the specific enemies of the world that we overcome? Sometimes the enemies are in the form of moral pressures. There is great pressure today to embrace the sexual license that is so common. Those who hold to biblical morality that reserves sexual expression to a committed marriage between a man and a woman are widely ridiculed in many parts of our society. There is also the immorality of materialism, by which we feel the pressure to define ourselves by our possessions or by the size of our investment portfolio. Sometimes the opposition is intellectual, by which we feel the pressure to think like the rest of the world. In our day, one of the principle forms of this is to embrace the view of religious pluralism that is current today, a view that says that everyone serves the same God. No one is wrong and everyone is right, even if they have contradictory views of God. The reason behind that view is that it's all a fiction anyway. It's like talking about which superhero is the strongest, when we all know that none of them really exist. Or sometimes we overcome doctrinally, when we stand against Satan's attempts to introduce false teaching into the church. A life focused on faith, love and obedience is able to overcome whatever enemies we may encounter. We can face the future with hope rather than fear because of this promise.

V. A Trajectory of Faith

John has mentioned faith several times in our passage, and on our final point I want to mention one aspect of faith that is often overlooked. It is this idea of the invisibility of God. John mentions twice in chapter 4 the fact that God is invisible. **“No one has ever seen God”** (4:12), and **“he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen”** (4:20). Think about it. It’s not surprising that people might think of Christians as a bit crazy. We have left all to follow Jesus and have put all of our hopes for the future in him, even though none of us has ever seen God.

Why doesn’t God show himself? Wouldn’t it make him easier to believe in if he just revealed himself through one clear, unmistakable miracle? We’ve got television now. Maybe God could hold a press conference in which he unveiled the cure for cancer and said to people, anyone who will believe in me can have access to this cure. He remains invisible for now for the same reason Jesus repeatedly told people to keep quiet about his miracles. To show himself with undeniable clarity in this age would actually be contrary to his love and mercy. Sure, it would impress people, and God would have no trouble getting a large number of followers. But would those followers love God? Would their hearts be transformed? Or would they just be following him in an external way? The day Jesus reveals himself and becomes visible will be the day when the door for salvation is permanently closed. It will be the day of judgment. So, for now, we love a God we have never seen because we are born again people of faith.

CONCLUSION:

What is the trajectory of your life? If it is not a life marked by faith, love and obedience, your life is on a trajectory that will not end well. I began this sermon talking about Robin Williams and his battle with depression, a battle it seems now that he lost. Let me mention someone else that has battled depression, but has done so with a clear faith, love and obedience. Steve Whitner reminded me this week that a former member of our church, and now a missionary we support, has spoken openly about his struggles with depression. He is similarly gifted to Robin Williams—a good sense of humor and a gifted actor. Charlie Jones has fought that battle, and in the words of John, he has overcome this part of the broken world. More accurately, his faith has overcome this. John invites us to an honest self-assessment. Is your faith such that you are overcoming? Is your love real and genuine, your obedience to God heartfelt? If not, God commands you to be born again. Of course, you can’t make yourself be born again. God alone can do that. Your part is to cast yourself upon him eye-handed. Count on his love for you through Christ.