

How to Win at Life

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Date: 07 August 2022

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture lesson comes from the New Testament, a reading from John's first epistle, chapter 5, verse 1 to 12.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God. When we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world, and this is the victory that has overcome the world, our faith.

Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ.

[1 : 20] Not by the water only, but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify, the Spirit and the water and the blood.

And these three agree. If we receive the testimony of man, the testimony of God is greater. For this is the testimony of God that he has born concerning his Son.

Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has born concerning his Son.

And this is the testimony that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life. Whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

This is the word of God. Thank you to God. Good morning, Christ Church. My name is Andrew, one of the pastors here. It's good to be worshiping with you this morning. Will you join me in prayer as we open up God's word?

[2 : 28] Lord God, there is no place we'd rather be than in your presence, in the presence of your Spirit.

And we ask that your Spirit, who is here now, would fill us and open up our hearts and soften them to receive your holy word. Your word that challenges us, but also invites us into the life that you want for us.

Help us to believe that by the power of your Spirit. And in the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. So I, in case you didn't know, we're in the sabbatical of our lead pastor.

He's almost back. And so we've had a bunch of guest preachers throughout the summer. And I was really praying that I wouldn't have to do this. But last Sunday, our guest preacher said some things that I'm going to have to come up here and correct.

Some things that were not necessarily true. I really didn't want to do this, but we're a church that really wants to preach the truth. Some of you might remember last week, Ryan, he was here preaching. And he said some pretty negative things about this artificial lagoon in Castro Valley called Coal Canyon.

[3 : 37] I just want you to know that Coal Canyon is actually awesome. Like, thus saith the Lord, Coal Canyon is awesome. And I love Coal Canyon.

My family loves Coal Canyon. I've loved it ever since I was a kid growing up around Castro Valley. Did I freak you out a little bit? Sorry. But we love Coal Canyon.

It's awesome. And if you ever want to come visit us for a beach day at Coal Canyon, you'll come and you'll see that what Ryan preached last week was absolute heresy, all right, regarding Coal Canyon.

Now, funnily enough, my family, we were actually at Coal Canyon just a little over a month ago with some of our daughters, some of the families in the preschool that our daughters go to.

And I wanted to share with you a very interesting conversation that I overheard while we were there at Coal Canyon. I was just playing with my girls in the sand, and maybe just a couple yards behind me were two people.

[4 : 33] They were millennials like myself, but they were cool millennials, not like me. I was, like, wearing my Costco swimming trunks. And this guy, he wasn't black, but he had braids, so you knew he was cool, right?

And one of the things that they were talking about was Burning Man and how transformative of an experience it was for them to be at Burning Man.

Now, if you are not familiar with what Burning Man is, it actually started here in the Bay Area in San Francisco in the 80s. And it's become, like, this big thing where, like, tons of people go out into the desert in Nevada.

I think the last event had over 500,000 people, and they experiment with living as an alternative community where the principles of participation and community and radical inclusion and self-reliance and self-expression are elevated and valued and celebrated.

And they try to be this kind of community out there. And it culminates, the end of the week culminates in the burning of this wooden structure called the man, right? It's, like, this place where people can be free to be as unconventional as they want to be.

[5 : 39] And I'm not here to condemn or to praise Burning Man or these two millennials who are talking about it. But one thing I overheard in their conversation has really stuck with me over the last month or so.

They were talking about Burning Man, and the guy was like, yeah, you know, living by the ten principles of Burning Man has really, really changed my life and for the better. And the girl, she said something that was so interesting.

She said, yeah, you know what? It's kind of like religion but without all the bad stuff. It's kind of like religion but without all the bad stuff. And I've been pondering ever since what she might have meant by religion and all the bad stuff.

And I'll never know. I won't be able to ask her what she meant. But based on what I know about Burning Man, my guess is that at least part of what she means by all the bad stuff is probably, like, the restrictiveness of religion, right?

As opposed to the supposed freedom of Burning Man, right? I think that's what she was getting at. And she's not necessarily wrong. Every way of life comes with a set of restrictions regarding against whatever is believed to be bad and harmful and thus better avoided, right?

[6 : 46] And so depending on how much you agree with a certain religion, depending on how much you agree with a certain way of life, it could definitely seem quite restrictive and burdensome.

Maybe some of us here feel that way about Christianity. Maybe this is why some of us are hesitant to take that next step into a deeper relationship with Christ and his church. Every time we find ourselves drawn to Jesus, we also remember those hard things he says about what he wants us to do with, you know, our money or our grudges or our bodies, our sex lives or our ultimate allegiances.

And it's unclear to us whether his ways and his commandments are a benefit or a burden in this game of life that we're all trying to win at. And this is not just a struggle for those who are exploring the faith, right?

But also for Christians, even for me as a pastor. Let's be real. God's ways, God's commandments, quite often, what, they seem far more burdensome than not, right?

And antithetical to winning at life. You know, even though I've been a Christian pretty much my whole life, I grew up in the church in a Christian home, I still often wondered since early in my childhood whether my Christian faith was true and whether the way of Jesus was actually the best way.

[8 : 04] For much of my life, I've entertained this thought experiment. Maybe you've played this same imagination game. It goes like this, man, if I wasn't a Christian, then da-da-da-da, right?

Man, if I wasn't a Christian, then fill in the blank. Have any of you Christians in the room pondered that question? If I weren't a Christian, then what?

You know, as a kid, me and my best friend, we used to say this to each other all the time. Man, if I wasn't a Christian, this. And it wasn't, man, if I wasn't a Christian, oh, I'd be so miserable without Jesus watching over me.

No, it was more like, man, if I wasn't a Christian, oh, the things I would do without Jesus watching me, right? I remember as a kid, I was thinking, man, if I wasn't a Christian, I'd have this awesome hidden stash of stolen candy in my bedroom.

If I wasn't a Christian in high school, man, I would have so much more time from just copying my friend's homework. If I wasn't a Christian in undergrad, I thought, man, if I wasn't a Christian, I'd have so much more fun with maybe the girls in my dorm.

[9 : 08] Man, if I wasn't a Christian, even now as an adult, as a pastor even, I think sometimes, man, if I wasn't a Christian, man, you know, all those, all the tithes and the offerings and the charitable donations, man, I could use that for a more secure retirement.

I could use that for more vacations, better vacations. Man, if I wasn't a Christian, I could go for longer weekend trips. My kids would have access to more extracurricular options.

Man, if I wasn't a Christian, I wouldn't feel so at odds with so much of what society values and celebrates and accepts and praises. I mean, am I the only one here?

Or does anyone else here sometimes feel like this, right? Their faith is holding them back. Like, Jesus' ways and his commands are such a burden, such a drag.

Anyone else here sometimes indulge that inner voice and maybe even mutter under their breath, man, if I wasn't a Christian, my life could be, my life would be so good.

[10 : 10] So good. So free. So unfettered. So unburdened by the rigorous commandments of God. Maybe this is how some of you have been feeling about this letter of 1 John we've been focusing on throughout the summer.

Some of you have mentioned to me how much you've noticed this obedience theme throughout the sermon series this summer. You've noticed I've been preaching some pretty hard, some pretty challenging things. And honestly, if it were up to me, I'd much prefer to just coddle you and give you hugs and lift you up with positive words of affirmation.

But 1 John hasn't exactly been that, right? And here in the first three verses of this last chapter, it's a lot more of the same. A lot more of the same of what we've been hearing. Verse 1, everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.

It's saying if you really believe in Jesus, if you're really a child of God and say that you love your Father in heaven, then you will also obey him and love him like the rest of his children. And not just loving him and his children with any kind of permissive, you know, relativistic love, but this is a love for others that is aligned with a love for God and his commandments.

Verse 2, by this we know that we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments. This letter has been saying again and again and again that all these things, all these three things, they always go together.

[11 : 34] Love for God, love for others, and obedience to God's commandments. Verse 3, for this is the love of God that we keep his commandments. And at this point, you may be like, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, we've heard this all already throughout this letter.

Maybe some of us are so ready, right, for the next sermon series. I'm so ready for Jonathan to come back. Tired of this repetitive, burdensome talk about obedience to God's commandments. But as if the Holy Spirit-inspired author of 1 John anticipated our dismissive mood and exasperation at this point in this letter, verse 3 continues, what does it say?

And his commandments are not burdensome. And his commandments are not burdensome. And I want to ask us today, like, whether you claim to be a Christian or not, is this an experience that you can confirm?

That his commandments are not burdensome? Do you agree? And if not, why? I think if we're all honest, it's hard, right? It's hard to agree with God here.

But why? Let's talk about why. Let's talk about why this is such a counterintuitive word from God.

His commandments are not burdensome. Like, why, if this is really God's word, why does obedience to God's command seem so burdensome and so antithetical to winning at life?

[12 : 54] Well, if God's word here is saying that his commandments are not burdensome, then perhaps, just maybe, maybe the question that we need to ask ourselves is, is it possible that we have misidentified and misdefined the win?

Is it possible that we've misdefined the win? Like, what if winning at life isn't what we thought that it was? What if winning at life wasn't necessarily home ownership, a Tesla, frequent tropical vacations, career success, health, status, reputation, and the admiration and approval of all our peers?

What if winning at life wasn't merely possessing that lifestyle, that look, that lover that we've been coveting as our thumbs scroll on our Instagram feeds? Like, could it be that God's commandments were actually only, they're only actually burdensome for those of us who are trying to play and win at the wrong game?

Let's try this illustration. I want to try this illustration. And I never create illustrations, but I worked really hard on this one, so let's try it. Imagine someone, or maybe a whole society, believes that to win at life, they must swim across this far expanse, or just get across this far expanse to this mythical island paradise, and claim as much of that paradise for themselves over against everyone else.

But they have no idea that the mythical island doesn't actually exist. And also, that the great expanse that everyone is building boats to try to cross is not filled with water, but lava.

[14 : 31] Now, imagine you're behind in this rat race, and other people's boats are already done, and they're inching toward what you believe to be water and paradise. And then imagine God comes to you with something that looks like floaties, all right?

And God says, hey, just put these on, and I guarantee you that you will win at life. And so thinking that they'll help you wade across the great expanse, you put them on.

But as soon as you put them on, you find out that these supposed floaties are like 100-pound weights, and even like magnets around your arms, pulling you away from what you believe to be water and paradise, and only drawing you nearer and nearer to the giver of these floaties.

Now, let me ask you, are these floaties a burden or a benefit? If you are blind to the actual non-existence of that paradise you thought you wanted, if you're blind to the reality of the lava you thought was water, then of course you'll see these floaties as a burden weighing you down, keeping you far from your goals, right?

But if you had eyes to see reality as God saw it, then wouldn't you be thankful and glad and happily wear these magnetic weights pulling you closer and closer to God and away from the ominous lava?

[15 : 51] Now, forgive me if this was a bad or a silly illustration, but the point is what if God's commandments were better for us than we know, better for us than we could understand? You know, in the beginning, in the beginning of all of history, as was recorded in Genesis chapter 1, God's first commandment to his people wasn't just a commandment.

It was also a blessing. It was a commandment and a blessing. It wasn't a restrictive prohibition, but a directive benediction. He said what? Be fruitful. He said, be fruitful.

I command you to be fruitful. And every other command God has ever uttered since has been a follow-up to this original commandment. protective guardrails, bright signals pointing us toward this fruitful, flourishing life that our Father in Heaven has always wanted us to enjoy.

God's commandments are not the words of some ominous, oppressive deity toward his dutiful religious adherents. No. They are words from a perfect and loving Father to his beloved children. They aren't restricting rules. They are enjoyable exhortations. They're meant to soothe us. They're meant to guide us. Or think about it this way. If you're a parent, or even if you can just imagine having a baby, right, what are the first commands that we speak to our infant children?

[17 : 13] Is it, do what I say because I'm the authority figure in your life? Is that the first command that you give to your little baby? No. Think about it. Our first commands to our children are probably, shh, shh, right?

Hush, little baby. Don't you cry. Or when we say, it's okay. It's okay. We're basically giving them the commandment, what? Trust me. Trust me.

Trust your daddy because I promise you, I'm going to do everything in my power for your good.

Now, I get that what I'm saying may seem like a big if to many of us.

Like, how do I even know that there's a God? How do I know if he's there, that he's a good, perfect, and loving God? And how do I know that this perfect island paradise that so many of us are pursuing actually doesn't exist?

You might be thinking, Andrew, how do you know that the way of Jesus laid out in the scriptures and his commandments are the best and only way to win at life? And the first thing I'd say is that I've seen it.

[18 : 21] I've seen clear winners at life, people for whom God's ways are not burdensome, but actually life-giving. I was speaking with our children's director, Jane George, this week, and when I asked her to fill in the blank, if you weren't a Christian, then what?

She said, if I weren't a Christian, I would be so profoundly bored. She was like, you know, before I became a Christian, I used to hate waiting in lines.

Like, I just can't believe this is a necessary part of my human existence, just waiting here in line at the supermarket. But then she said, but you know, when I became a Christian, I distinctly remember thinking to myself, wow, I'm never going to be bored again.

I can stand in any line, because I will always and forever be in the presence of God and never without purpose or anticipation of all the good things that he has in store for this world and how I can take part in it.

And you need to know that this is not coming from just a happy-go-lucky, naive woman who's enjoyed life mostly unscathed from heartache. In case those of you don't know Jane George's story, much like Maria Francis, she was a pastor's wife as well.

[19 : 31] I'm so lucky to be working with two amazing pastor's wives and gleaning their wisdom and the wisdom of their husbands. And her pastor's wife, her husband, his name was David George.

Many of you know him because he used to pastor here. And before that, he was a well-respected church planner in the Sacramento area. And he's a huge reason, actually, why I'm here.

And that's a story for another day. But for those of you who don't know, David passed away from a very sudden pancreatic cancer back in 2015. And yet Jane was sharing with me just this week how although of course she wishes David was still here and how of course she hates that he's gone, she was sharing with me how amazed she is at how God's continued her story and her fruitful ministry. How God's allowed her to serve and to support and to meet people in their grief whom she otherwise would never have been able or equipped to care for. And even as she felt like she was winning at life at David's side in their thriving church plant, she will tell you that she still feels fulfilled and like a winner at life even now in the sadness of her present season without him.

I believe Jane George is a winner at life following the way of Jesus. Now maybe you're still like, hey, okay, that might be good for Jane George, but I'm still not convinced.

[20 : 56] Maybe you have a different vision than she does for what it means to win at life. You'd rather be rich and famous than a whittled children's ministry director.

I get it. You have other ambitions that you'd prefer to achieve, other appetites that you're looking to satisfy, the approval of others that you're focused on winning. And if that's the case, what I'd like to ask you this morning is, okay, maybe you have a different and supposedly better vision of winning at life.

But think about it. What commandments does that way of life impose upon you? And are God's commandments really more burdensome than those? Are they?

See, even those of us who aren't religious, as we all try to win at life, we're also all bound by the rules of some game, bound by some set of commandments that will help us achieve our ambitions, win people's approval, and satisfy our appetites.

We're all doing it. We're all going after the three A's, ambition, appetite, and approval. And we're all obeying some set of commands that we believe will help us arrive at the three A's. And I want us to honestly think about what kind of a world that's resulted in.

[22 : 08] I mean, don't you see how pursuing our ambitions, apart from God's ways, has only perpetuated the world's cutthroat culture of competition? And can't you see how following our appetites, apart from God's ways, has only perpetuated the world's gluttonous culture of consumerism?

And can we not see how living for the approval of others has only perpetuated the world's vain culture of celebrity? And don't we see how each of these cultures of competition and consumerism

and celebrity, how they all have commandments of their own, and their commandments are absolutely crushing.

Thou shalt get into the best school. Thou shalt get the best career, or you cannot win at life. Thou shalt accumulate the most toys and experience the most pleasures, or else you cannot win at life. Thou shalt be the most lovely and beautiful and admirable person in the world, or you cannot win at life. Think about it. The world commands us to work and to sacrifice and to hustle and to work these 60 hours a week just to have a chance at winning at life.

Meanwhile, God commands us, thou shalt rest. Thou shalt observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. Thou shalt trust me. I want to ask you, which of these commandments is truly more liberating? [23 : 32] Which of these commandments truly offers a better freedom? See, God's word that his commandments are not burdensome, this is an implicit critique of American culture's prevalent misunderstanding of freedom.

You know, we have so naively come to believe that freedom is radical, individual autonomy and independence from all sources of authority. But in his book, *The Second Mountain*, New York Times columnist David Brooks, he reminds us of how problematic this understanding of freedom really is.

Commenting on the naivete of what he calls the secular sermons of our day, commencement addresses, he says, many young people are graduating into limbo, floating and plagued by uncertainty.

They want to know what specifically they should do with their lives. So we hand them the great empty box of freedom. But the students put down this box asking what this freedom is for. And so we hand them the equally empty boxes of possibility and authenticity and autonomy and tell them, sky's the limits, look inside yourself, find your passion, you do you, define your own values. [24 : 44] But, he writes, you will notice that our answers take all the difficulties of living in your 20s and make them worse. The graduates are in limbo and we give them uncertainty.

And while, of course, David Brooks, he acknowledges, of course, the benefits of freedom from unjust structures of oppression, right? But the point he's making is that freedom for freedom's sake alone, this kind of radical, autonomous freedom, it won't deliver because it can't deliver.

In the conclusion of this chapter entitled, *Instagram Life*, he mourns for our many contemporary graduates. He says, nobody told them freedom sucks.

Political freedom is great, but personal, social, and emotional freedom when it becomes an ultimate end absolutely sucks. It leads to a random, busy life with no discernible direction, no firm foundation.

It turns out that freedom isn't an ocean you want to spend your life in. Freedom is a river you want to get across so you can plant yourself on the other side and fully commit to something.

[25 : 50] And this brings us to verse four. You see, the key to winning at life isn't radical autonomy, self-expression, or freedom from God's commands. It doesn't say that to win at life you need to become God-like on your own by your own strength and ingenuity.

No, to win at life you have to be a dependent child of God. Verse four, for everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world and this is the victory that has overcome the world, not our might, not our accomplishments, not our reputation, but our faith.

Our dependence, our trust. The word for overcome here is *nikao*, it's where Nike comes from meaning to conquer. And the beauty of the Christian faith is that we conquer not as warriors but as children.

Not through independence but through utter dependence on God. And see, this is the gospel. This is the gospel. Every other method of winning at life requires that we win at life, that we conquer, that we overcome the world by our own independent faithfulness to the burdensome commands of this world.

But the good news of the Christian faith is that Jesus says to his disciples, take heart, I have overcome the world. This is how verse five can say, who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

[27 : 09] Or as the Apostle Paul writes, we are more than conquerors, right, through him who loved us. This is the gospel, that Jesus, the Son of God, came to conquer the world we couldn't conquer, to win at life when we were doomed to lose at life.

And he did it precisely by obeying the commandments of his Father in heaven as a real life human being in the flesh. This is what verse six is getting at.

This is he who came by water and blood. Jesus Christ, not by the water only, but by the water and the blood. See, the Son of God came into history in the flesh. He was baptized in the water of the Jordan at the beginning of his ministry and crucified on the bloody cross of Calvary at the end of his ministry.

And while the spirits of this competitive world told us all, including him, that to conquer and overcome the world, we must paint the world red with the blood of others. Jesus, filled with the Spirit of God, the beloved Son of God, with whom the Father was well pleased from beginning to end, Jesus insisted on conquering and overcoming the world, not through the blood of others, but through his own blood.

Through his own blood. And when the powers of this world thought that they were winning by crucifying him on a Roman cross, this king on a cross crowned with thorns overcame the world, subverting all its ways and put death to death by his death and his resurrection to victorious, eternal life.

[28 : 42] So you see, as it says in verse six and onward, the water and the blood and the Spirit of Jesus are the ultimate testimony from God himself of how and of what it looks like to win at life.

Jesus is the ultimate testimony that God's way is the right way to win at life, even when it seems futile, even when God's way leads us through the valley of the shadow of death to a world that would question who has ever won at life by going God's way?

Who on my Instagram feed, who on my TV screen, who at the top of the most powerful corporations and governments of this world, who of all the people we envy for their lavish lifestyles, whoever won at life by submitting to God, whoever won at life by utterly depending on him and obeying his commandments and loving others through self-denial and self-sacrifice, if we have ears to hear him as the truth teller that he is and not as a liar, God's answer is, my son, my crucified and risen son, Jesus Christ.

And if you have ears to hear his voice this morning, this Jesus says to all of us, come to me. Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I, and I alone, am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

[30 : 13] Jesus sees all the other yokes that we've been trying to fit around our neck and how badly they fit around our necks and how they only leave bruises and scars. He sees how heavily they weigh us down and how lazy and selfish and foolish and feeble are all these other beasts that we try to yoke ourselves to in the hopes of arriving at this salvation that we long for, this burdenless rest that we're all looking for.

And he says, I know you're weary and I know you're heavy laden because you were never meant to lumber under the cultural yokes of competition and consumerism and celebrity.

So come, take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls because I have already overcome the world.

and when you're yoked with me, he says, sure, that does mean you'll go where I go, but don't you want to? Even through the valley of the shadow of death, remember I've been there and back.

Take my yoke upon you, he says. Take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Let's pray. Lord God, we want to heed these words, this invitation and this challenge from Jesus to take his yoke upon us.

[31 : 40] Lord, so many voices in this world tell us to offer us these foolish, weak oxen to yoke ourselves to where we have to do so much more of the pooling.

so much of the world, of what the world tells us, God, is that it is foolishness to yoke ourselves to a submissive lamb about to be slaughtered.

But help us to see the truth and to help us, help us to see that it is precisely because this lamb was submissive and slaughtered that he is also a lion.

Help us to live in that reality, Lord. open our eyes to that better truth, that subversive truth that is so hard to believe sometimes. Fix our eyes upon Jesus, the one who won at life, the one who has overcome the world.

And would we take his yoke upon us and know the lightness of his burden? Would we know your rest, oh God?

[32 : 49] Would we know your rest, this rest that you've wanted for us from all eternity yet we so often run away from? Help us to know it, to pursue it, and to trust it, God, we pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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