

Walking in the light: 9

[1 John 5:1-12](#)

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The PBS show, *Ask This Old House* has a segment called, “What is it?” During the segment, the personalities of the show gather around a workbench with an object placed on it. Each person takes a turn explaining what they think the item is designed for. And all of the answers, except the last – are all silly, and nowhere near what the item is actually designed for. Finally, the person who selected the item gives the actual answer for what the object is actually designed.

Without the intended purpose given, the object in that segment of *Ask This Old House* becomes whatever someone wants it to be. This scenario in the show describes how our world often engages with spirituality. When social researchers ask the question to people if they are religious or not, more and more people are answering with: “no” or “unidentified (not with an organized religion).” But when asked if they are spiritual, the answer is: “yes.” Look up most any recent poll like this, and you’ll see what I’m saying. How can that be, right? People claim to be non-religious, but are spiritual?

In years past, spirituality could generally be located within a religious framework. But that is not the case in our day and age. Ask any person now what their “spirituality” is and you’ll likely get a different answer from each person. Because spirituality has become whatever we want it to mean. **In our world, spirituality has become detached from a specific objective reality.**

In 2023 spirituality can look like: Finding myself (seeking an identity beyond our current reality). Believing love is everything (seeking a quality beyond ourselves). Seeking thrilling moment (seeking something beyond ordinary life). Communing with nature (seeking to be part of something bigger than one’s self). Seeking aha moments (inspiration - seeking information beyond oneself). Seeking awww moments (emotional moment - seeking an emotional experience beyond our own circumstance). Some of these realities have redeeming qualities. But what they all have in common is that they are seek meaning in an undefined other. Who says what myself is? What is love? What thrill? How much of a thrill? What exactly are you doing to commune with nature? What information can bring inspiration? What moments can make you feel that way? All of these are detached from a specific reality. And with a lack of specificity, we are left to fill-in that void on our own, with something, anything, all sorts of things.

While you may be thinking. I’m tracking with you. But I don’t do that. I’m a Christian. My spirituality is in Jesus? Even if you are a Christian, I challenge you to consider if your spirituality is actually connected to Jesus. Which is what God’s word calls us to consider when we encounter 1 John 5:1-12. 1 John 5 challenges us to consider if our spirituality is detached from Jesus. And more specifically, it **1 John 5 challenges us to consider if our spirituality is detached from the cross of Jesus.** Is it possible for our Christian spirituality to avoid the need for the cross of Jesus and the cruciform-oriented life that he calls us to live?

Growing up, I remember my mom emphasizing for us to be careful with what utensils we used on our kitchen countertops. The reason was that the countertops were not solid stone. They were veneered wood countertops. The veneer gave the impression that the countertops were a marbly material. But in substance they actually were were something else.

Is it possible that our Christian spirituality is actually just a Jesus-veneered form of self-help? Or a Jesus-veneered form of inspiration? Or a Jesus-veneered form of finding ourselves? A Jesus-veneered form of spirituality? Is it possible that our spirituality is about Jesus making our life better, but without suffering involved. That our spirituality is about Jesus teachings inspiring us to something better, but without suffering involved. That our spirituality is about Jesus loving us, but without suffering involved.

1 John 5 calls us to consider if our spirituality is detached from the cross of Jesus. It calls us to believe that true spirituality is never detached from the cross of Jesus. True spirituality can't ignore suffering. On this side of death, a spirituality without suffering ignores the reality of sin and evil in the world. And 1 John 5 call us to remember that Jesus' life and death address the reality of sin. That Jesus' death addresses humanity's separation from **The life of God is the truest and fullest form of spirituality**. Without Jesus overcoming sin and death, we could not eternally participate in the spirituality of the life of God. **True spirituality is never detached from the cross of Jesus.**

Back when the Pegulas took over ownership of the Bills, after they already had ownership of the Sabres, a phrase was adopted for a couple years to highlight that reality: One Buffalo. Some of you may have a shirt, sticker, magnet or something with that on it. Let's say that history fast-forwards 1,000 years to 3023. If someone came across the phrase: One Buffalo, do you think they'd know what it was referencing? Probably not, right? In 2023, one of the most peculiar phrases to us in 1 John 5 is the phrase: by water and blood (see verses 6 and following). This phrase is kind of like my illustration of the phrase One Buffalo. Thousands of years removed from when 1 John was written to it's audience, we are not immediately sure by reading the passage and it's context – what the phrase is referencing. To the original audience, they likely knew exactly what was being referenced. But to us, it's not immediately clear. Just like One Buffalo would be unclear to someone in 3023.

There is much agreement by Bible scholars that the *blood* portion of the phrase is in reference to Jesus' death. That much is understandable from the context of 1 John 5 (as well as what we know about Jesus' life from the other writings in the Bible). What is debated is what the *water* portion of the phrase means. There are a few common explanations for what else the *water* part of the phrase means.

1) Is that it references the moment after Jesus' death where a Roman soldier pierced his side and water and blood came out – indicating that he was definitely dead (see John 19:34). 2) Is that it references entrance into God's life through the water of baptism (see John 3:5; Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5). 3) Is that it references Jesus' baptism by John the baptist, where God simultaneously voiced that Jesus is the Son of God (see Mark 1:9-11).

There are pros and cons to all of these: With option 1, it doesn't match as well with 1 John's reference to "water only" – as water and blood were together when Jesus was pierced. With option 2, the focus on baptism seems like it's being read back into the passage, rather than what is directly being referenced. With option 3, 1 John 5 referencing Jesus' baptism by John the baptist seems a bit odd, since Jesus' baptism is not reference in the gospel of John.

With those three options considered, to me, the third option still seems to fit the best. Even though John's gospel doesn't directly mention Jesus' baptism, does not mean that John (or those under his teaching) would be unfamiliar with it. At the end of John's gospel, he notes that he doesn't include everything from Jesus' life (John 21:25). But with *water* here referring to Jesus' baptism, to me, it fits well with the *water only* reference. Meaning, not by Jesus' baptism alone does God testify that Jesus overcomes the world. Not by God declaring Jesus to be God's Son – fully testifies that Jesus overcomes the world. Not by God's Spirit descending on Jesus as a dove - fully testifies that Jesus overcomes the world. Jesus overcame the world by what was declared of him during his baptism, yes. But also by his blood – by his suffering on the cross. Together, what was revealed to be true of Jesus at his baptism is confirmed all the more by his death on the cross. And the Spirit holds these realities together as a full and final witness from God of who Jesus is. That he is the one who overcomes the world. That he is the one who overcomes sin and death. **True spirituality is never detached from the cross of Jesus.**

One morning during our recent vacation, we went to get into our van to go get coffee and realized that we had an almost flat tire. So, we had to immediately locate a place to get the tire repaired. In this situation, the tire-pressure light on the instrument panel indicated an issue with the tire. The appearance of the tire indicated that there was an issue with the tire. And the technician finding a nail in the tire indicated that there was an issue with the tire. It was difficult to ignore that there was an issue with that tire. For three witnesses pointed to there being an issue. If we were to ignore them, then we'd be saying that: The instrument panel was lying (which, who hasn't wanted that to be the case – tape over the light works, right?). But it wasn't malfunctioning. Our eyes were lying to us - by the appearance of the low tire. And our eyes worked fine. And the technician was lying to us about finding a nail in the tire. And he wasn't. We could choose to ignore the issue. But we were doing so at the expense of saying the witnesses were wrong – that they were lying. 1 John 5 makes a similar point about how God witnesses to the truth of our messed-up world; and how we make God out to be a liar by ignoring his revelation.

Some of the other material that I encountered about the phrase *water and blood* also revealed that it has reference to some kind of teaching during the writing of 1 John – where people were saying that the flesh and blood nature of Jesus' life wasn't important. They were saying that what is important about Jesus is his teachings, ideas, and vision for the world. What was being taught was a spirituality that didn't need God to take on flesh and blood. A spirituality that didn't need Jesus' death. A spirituality that didn't need the blood and suffering of Jesus. A spirituality that just needed the enlightenment of Jesus teachings.

Assumed here is a worldview that the world just needs better information and ideas to progress forward in a better direction. An assumption that the world isn't fundamentally broken from sin. An assumption that better information and ideas is what is needed to bring healing to the world. This worldview results in a spirituality that, at best, is veneered with Jesus' teachings. It results in a spirituality that lacks the specific spirituality of Jesus. It lacks a spirituality with the cross and cruciform-lifestyle of Jesus.

Throughout 1 John, and even here in verses 6 and following, there is an emphasis on the Holy Spirit's testimony to the truth that God reveals. You can know what God revealed by what the Holy Spirit impresses upon you. So, in the background of this *water and blood* phrase are teachers saying that Jesus' life and death aren't needed. And they were doing so by saying that their teaching is under the direction of God's Spirit. That their teaching is in line with what God revealed. But 1 John 5 is refuting that by saying that God's Spirit will never reveal something that doesn't include the shed blood of Jesus. 1 John 5 is helping us to see that Jesus' life and death are markers of what God's Spirit actually reveals. And God's Spirit is always in line with the cruciform example of Jesus' life. The spirituality that God's Spirit reveals is always in line with Jesus' life and death.

Many of us have heard of someone saying something along the lines of: God told me. Or, this is what God wants for my life right now. Or, using Christian-ese-sounding language like: God just needed another angel - for when someone dies. While all of these phrases sound good and similar to something in the Bible. The true decider on if these statements are in line with God's Spirit, is how they align with the cross of Jesus. Is what God told you just a Jesus-veneered self-help concept? Or does it call you to surrender something more to Jesus to transform you or help someone else? Is the language of a deceased relative as an angel really reflective of the transformed life that Jesus came to bring to them and to you, or just a feel-good sentiment that escapes the harsh realities of this world? I get why we'd want to say something like that. It sounds comforting. But is it reflective of reality as it is? Is it reflective of the brokenness of the world – that is evidenced by Jesus being put to death. That sin and death are real realities that need overcome. **Only guidance and wisdom that are in line with the cruciform life of Jesus are what God's Spirit will reveal to you.** Anything else is not the full truth of God.

And often that cannot be fully discerned on your own. You need a community of people to help you see past your biases and blind-spots. Which involves suffering: humility, patience, and reliance on others. **True spirituality is never detached from the cross of Jesus.**

Mahatma Gandhi, the historically popular nonviolent activist in India, is often quoted as liking Jesus but not Christianity. In a sense, Gandhi was good with the things Jesus taught, and even advocated for many of them. But Gandhi could never grasp how Jesus' death actually changed anything – to where he needed to convert. So, for him, the teachings of Jesus were divorced from Jesus' death. It seems that Gandhi thought that Jesus' teachings could be implemented, if just added into a person's life. But that came with the assumption that a person's life doesn't need transformed at a substantial level by the Spirit of God - to actually live like Jesus. Throughout the Bible, Jesus' life and teachings point toward the need for: rebirth – being

substantially changed (dying to this life, to arise in a new reality) – to fully enter into his Kingdom – to fully live-out his life. Not just life as it is now with his teachings added in.

We know this at a personal level as well. Try to tell the truth consistently without being transformed by Jesus. Try to forgive consistently without being transformed by Jesus. What we usually find is that we can tell the truth or forgive for a time or season, but fail to do it fully and completely. Because we need something else to be drastically changed. We need Jesus to change us and the world around us.

We are not ok how we are, we need Jesus to transform us from the inside out – at a substantial level. 1 John 5:4 describes that everyone who has been “born” of God overcomes the world. We need born into the life of God by Jesus. But only clinging in hope to Jesus’ resurrected life can we be born of God. **For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united in the likeness of his resurrection (Romans 6:5).** But all of this revolves around God taking on flesh in the person of Jesus and overcoming sin and death. To usher in new life. The life of the New Adam – the life of Christ, as the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians. **For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22).** We see and hear this culminating in 1 John 5, when verse 12 states, **Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life (1 John 5:12).** True spirituality is never detached from the cross of Jesus.

The good news for us to hear from 1 John 5 is that God’s revealed truth does not ignore reality. God’s revealed truth does not ignore the reality that sin and evil are present in our world and need overcome. Jesus’ life and death confirm this reality. That Jesus, a sinless person, was put to death due to the sin of humanity. That Jesus overcame the end result of sin – death – to rise free from the impact of sin. That Jesus invites all of us to partake in his resurrected life – to be transformed from sin to Godliness – from death to fullness of life. And God’s Spirit is present and active in our world to further confirm what Jesus’ life and death and the written word of God says as the truth. These three testify to the truth. These three testify that true spirituality is never detached from the cross of Jesus. **True spirituality is never detached from the cross of Jesus.**

Is your spirituality attached to the cross of Jesus?

If you’re new to connecting those dots with spirituality, and you realize that you need Jesus, I invite you to **Consider attaching your spirituality to Jesus by being united to his death and resurrection in baptism.**

If you’ve already attached your spirituality to Jesus, I invite you to let God’s Spirit refine your spirituality through the cross and cruciform-life of Jesus. **Where does your spirituality lack the cross of Jesus?** How is Jesus calling you to follow in his cruciform way? As he leads each of us to the fullness of life only found in him?

True spirituality is never detached from the cross of Jesus.