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THE LITMUS TEST

1 John 4:1-6

INTRODUCTION

Do you ever feel like you’re different? Do you ever feel like you’re out of step with most people? I feel that a lot. Many of the ways I’m different are trivial. They are about food, drink, restaurants, movies and music. But there are also ways I’m totally out of step with most people in our culture that are much more significant than my tastes in entertainment, food and drink. When it comes to morality and what is most important in life, I am way off from the prevailing trends of our culture.

When I was in college a group I was a part of once had a car rally. We were all given clues to follow that, if properly deciphered, would lead us to a destination where we were going to have a party. There was a reward for the winners of the car rally. We were also given a sealed envelope that we were to open if we passed a time limit. It contained clear directions to the party location. There were 4 of us in the car I was in, and at one point we saw several other cars from the rally all heading in the same direction. But I was certain it was the wrong direction. They had misinterpreted a clue. We debated in our car which way to go, and fortunately, I won out. We didn’t follow the crowd. That was good, because they all got lost. They had to give up and open the envelope. Had we been like everyone else, we’d have gotten lost like everyone else. If you feel kind of weird, sort of out of step, maybe a little on the outside, then congratulations. It turns out that weird is wonderful. In fact, it is necessary if you want to get the most out of life. I think you’ll see what I mean as we look at 1 John 4:1-6 today. We will be looking at the question of what we need in order to get the most out of life.

WE NEED A LITMUS TEST

John tells us in verse 1 that we should not “believe every spirit.” He says we need to test the spirits to see whether they are from God. This sounds rather spooky and mystical. It sounds like there are all these spirits floating around out there communicating with us and we need to know the good ones from the bad ones. How do you test spirits? What does this mean?

One little observation will clarify this. When John speaks of “spirits” in this verse, he’s referring to people. We know that because he says many false prophets, people teaching wrong things, are in the world. These are the “spirits” he wants us to test. This is John’s way of saying that we are going to encounter a lot of people claiming to know spiritual truth. We need to not accept them and their ideas merely because they say God has given them some supposed truth. We need to test whether their claims actually are true.

But how do you test these people? John gives us a crucial test. Spiritual or not spiritual, here’s the key. “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus, is not from God.” Okay, hold on. Most people acknowledge that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. History is heavily influenced by the reality that the human Jesus of Nazareth lived in the first century. Most everyone knows that. Does this mean that most everyone is from God?

No, John was using a bit of shorthand here. By calling him Jesus Christ, John was saying he was Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, essentially God in human form. He is saying the flesh and blood person of Jesus was God revealing himself in physical form in the physical world. The false teachers denied that was possible. God, they asserted, is purely spiritual and thus true good. The material, in their scheme, is inherently bad. In their claims it would be impossible for the good, spiritual God, to come in flesh, because flesh is inherently evil. So, yes, the man, Jesus existed, but he could not have been God in human, thus corrupted, form. Such a thing would be abhorrent. God would no longer be good. That’s what they taught, and John said when you apply his test to them they get an F minus.

The spirit of the antichrist will always deny that Jesus was God in human form. If a person admits that Jesus was Christ, thus divine, then they must bow to him and worship him. So that is always going to be the critical test. The definition of a litmus test is, a “decisively indicative test” of something. It can refer to any single factor that determines the true character of something. The true nature of Jesus Christ is the litmus test that tells whether a person claiming spiritual knowledge from God has the truth or not. Those who admit that Jesus is the Son of God, are from God, those who don’t, are not.

In our culture, John’s statement is seen as abhorrent. It is considered narrow, bigoted and untrue. Our culture claims that the only litmus test for being a good and acceptable person is that he or she has no litmus test. There is no one truth when it comes to moral and spiritual things. Each person finds his or her own truth. So there is no possible test for whether someone is from God. All moral and spiritual truth is subjective and relative, we are told.

Roger Wengert is a philosophy professor at the University of Illinois. He often teaches a class on ethics. He frequently begins this class by asking how many of the students believe that truth is relative. The overwhelming majority of his students raise their hands, indicating they agree that truth is relative. He then goes over the course syllabus, test dates, paper due dates and content. He concludes by explaining his grading system. Students will receive grades based on their height. The tallest students love this idea until he clarifies, “Shortest students will get an A, tallest students will receive an F.” You can imagine how that is received. “That’s not fair!” The students stridently object, “You should grade us based on how well we do on our tests and papers. The determining factor ought to be how well we master the material.” All affirm this, especially the tall students. He then says, “By using words like should and ought, you betray your alleged conviction that truth is relative. If you were a true relativist, you would realize that there is no external standard to which my grading should conform.” He asserts if all things are truly relative, he can give grades however he wants. The students are confronted with the *truth*, that truth is not, in fact, relative, that there is some standard of what is fair, just and good, and everyone knows it.

Why is having this kind of litmus test important? Life is like a journey, like going on a trip. In order for you to have a good trip there are a couple of things that are necessary. You must know where you are going, and you must know how you are going to get there. You need truth about your trip. We need truth about our journey through life. There are countless people who are going to tell you what your destination should be and how to get there, but they don’t all agree. How do you know who is right? Our culture absurdly says they are all right. Logic tells you they cannot all be right, because they do not agree.

Let’s suppose that the pandemic has finally left us alone and you are going to go on a vacation that begins with a flight over the ocean. You know that there are people whose job is to calculate how much fuel the aircraft will need to get safely to the destination. Do you want those people to be relativists? There is no absolute right or wrong. Each person has their own opinion on how much fuel will be needed and they are all equally valid. Is that fine with you? It’s not okay by me. I want those people to totally understand the math involved, to figure the variables correctly and to get the answer right with a safety margin for unforeseen circumstances. Any opinion other than the correct math is unacceptable.

Some will object, “But Rick, you’re comparing apples and oranges. Sure, there is objective truth when you are talking about objective things like math and grading, but when it comes to spiritual and moral things it is all relative and subjective. There is no one objective truth.” Really? There are some problems with that statement. First, saying there is no objective truth in moral or spiritual matters is an absolute statement about moral and spiritual things. It is a claim to objective truth about moral and spiritual things. It claims that it is objectively true that there are no objective moral and spiritual truths. It is self-contradictory. If it is true, then it is not true. There is no way for it to be true because if it is not true, then it is not true, and if it is true, then it is still not true. The relativist might say, “Fine, then there is only one absolute truth, and it is that there are no other objective truths.”

That leads us to a second problem then. We must ask, you who make this claim, where, exactly, did you get this one objective truth that in spiritual and moral things all things are relative? What is the infallible source that reveals that all encompassing truth? I read it on the Internet. Oh, well, then obviously it must be true because they couldn’t put it on the Internet if it weren’t true, right?

The most common response to the question of where one gets the idea that all moral and spiritual things are relative is, “it’s just what I think. It is obvious to me.” Suppose you have a medical issue and you’re not sure what to do about it. Would you accept the advice of someone who said, “it’s just what I think”? No way. You need to know that advice is grounded in facts and reliable knowledge. You’d insist on knowing the source of information of a person’s medical knowledge and advice. Why would you not do the same about advice that impacts the state of your immortal soul? It turns out there is no such reliable source of this one certain truth.

There is a third problem. Let’s imagine that I find this doctrine that each person must find his or her own truth appealing, and I decide to take this relativistic approach to life. I like the idea that each person must find his or her own truth. I decide that my truth is that I am a wealthy man with many millions of dollars in the bank. On that basis I decide that having a 6 year old Nissan Rogue with 85,000 miles on it is not befitting a man of my means and status, and that I should have a much more luxurious and prestigious car. So I, being environmentally conscious, decide to buy a top of the line Tesla to replace our Rogue. Hey, it’s only $119,000 and I’ve got millions. I also decide I should have a vacation home, and I decide to buy a nice 3 bedroom condo on the beach in Maui so we can enjoy vacations there and provide a place for family and friends to stay. It’s only a couple of million dollars. What is going to happen? My “truth” is going to have a painful collision with the bank’s “truth,” because they don’t believe I have millions of dollars in the bank. They don’t believe it because it is not *true*! The problem here is life in the real world cannot be lived on a relativistic basis. We have to choose and act on the basis of what is objectively true. Does it make sense that to survive in this world we must operate on the basis of true and untrue, right and wrong, but then somehow that’s not so in the moral and spiritual realms? Does it make any sense that the moral and spiritual realms are divorced from the way the rest of life works? That makes no sense whatsoever.

There are lots of people telling us what the destination should be and how we get there. In order for us to have a good journey through life, we need a litmus test to tell us who is right and wrong, because some are right and many more are wrong. That litmus test is the identity of Jesus Christ, the man who claimed to be God. That is a worthy test, because it is not based on philosophical or theological assumption or speculation. Jesus proved his claims in real life on this earth. The simple and obvious truth is that if the Creator God did reveal himself in human history, we had better pay attention. If we get that wrong, our lives will be disastrously wrong. Our plane is going to crash, and it will be fatal.

WE NEED A GREATER FORCE

There is another thing we see in these verses that is necessary to have a fully successful journey through life. It turns out that not only are there people out there that are steering us wrong, there are actually some beings whose passion is to make sure that we never get where we need to go and who also want to make sure we are miserable while we are on the way. These beings were at work through the “false prophets” that John was dealing with. Those who would steer us wrong may not be consciously seeking ill for us, but they are being used by beings who are.

Obviously, John was talking about Satan. John claims that there are spiritual forces in this world doing everything they can to divert us into dead ends. The good news, he says, is his readers, and by extension, we, have overcome them. We have not been ruined by their schemes and lies. This is not because we are so much smarter than other people. It is because “the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” The Spirit of Christ is more powerful than Satan himself. It is because of the Spirit of Jesus in us that we believed in the first place and continue to stand firm, not because of our own strength or wisdom.

We have an enemy who is determined to stop us from reaching our journey’s destination successfully. He wants to thwart us at every turn, and his great desire is the whole thing becomes a train wreck. How different our journey will be if we have a person with us who can defeat the enemy and all of his schemes. John says that is the case for us. The Spirit of God is with us, and he is stronger than anyone or anything. Greater is the one who is with us, the Spirit of Christ, than the one who is in the world, Satan and his forces.

This verse is frequently quoted by people who use it in all kinds of ways. We can always pursue our dreams because greater is the one in us. We can know that we will succeed in what we endeavor because greater is the one who is in us. That is not what John intended. He was focused on spiritual strength, security and health because God is with us. He wasn’t promoting some positive thinking, health and wealth gospel kind of thing.

What does this mean for us? Many years ago when I was in college I was at a Christian conference where we stayed in dorm-like quarters with 8 guys in each room. Late one night as we had all gone to bed we were talking in the dark. One of the guys in the room was from a third world country where spiritual warfare, by all accounts, tends to break into the physical world. This guy told some stories about things he had seen and experienced that were spooky and kind of scary. It was shiver down the spine, hair stand on end kind of stuff. It creeped us all out. At one point one of the guys said, “Hey, uh, does anybody else feel like praying?” He was kind of freaked out, and he wasn’t alone. A few years later some friends told me of a house they had lived in that they later found out had been previously occupied by some members of a satanic cult. They related stories of some weird, upsetting and unexplainable events that happened in the house. Again, it was creepy. But here’s the thing, I wasn’t freaked out much then, and am even less so today. The reason is, greater is the one who is in us than the one who is in the world. There is a very real spiritual enemy, but he cannot lay a finger on us because of who is in us.

There are Christians who tell us that many of our struggles are due to demonic forces who oppress us. The scriptural evidence for such teaching is scant at best. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, according to Jesus’ own words, you have the Spirit of Jesus in you. Demons can try to do whatever they want against you and it won’t matter. The Spirit of Christ is in you, and he is so much greater than any enemy wannabe that a comparison would be laughable. They cannot harm you. All you need to do is trust in the Spirit of Christ and you will sail through unharmed.

I recently read Sean Parnell’s book, *Outlaw Platoon*. Parnell is a former army officer, and in that book recounts his experiences during his year long deployment to Afghanistan as a lieutenant leading an infantry platoon. He mentioned the difference it made when his platoon got armored Humvees. There were several battles where his platoon was ambushed and caught in a terrifying kill zone. But the enemy was firing mostly assault rifles. He described being in his Humvee and hearing the bullets striking the vehicle, but bouncing off. Having the Spirit of God within us is kind of like that. The enemy will be firing at us, and might inflict scratches on the paint and but he cannot cause any spiritual casualties.

The enemy wants to divert us, discourage us, distract us and defeat us. He will use temptations, like he did in Eden, to divert us. He will use attacks on our faith to try to confuse us. He will batter us with hardships and difficulties and losses in the world to discourage us, make us feel helpless and hopeless, and ultimately defeat us. But greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world. God is greater than the enemy, greater than his attacks. If we will look to him and trust him, he will enable us to stand firm and stay on track.

Mother Teresa once spent a whole day fruitlessly walking the streets of Calcutta looking for a place where she could start her work. It was totally discouraging. At the end of that day she wrote in her diary, “I wandered the streets the whole day. My feet are aching, and I have not been able to find a home. And I also get the Tempter telling me, ‘Leave all this, go back to the convent from which you came.’” But she saw that for what it was. God gave her the strength to go on. And now the ministry that came from her perseverance ministers to thousands of suffering and impoverished people and inspires many thousands more.

WE NEED A DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING

Verse 5 identifies a big problem with those who don’t have the Spirit of Christ. “They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world.” John says, “We are from God.” His point is that those who are “from God” are going to have a very different perspective on everything than those who are not. Those who are not from God have nothing else but the world and its viewpoint, which is shaped by Satan. What we can easily forget is that Satan’s goal is to destroy us. The system of thinking he has installed in this world is designed to ruin us. Its purpose is to keep us from experiencing the life of God. It is aimed at creating discord, frustration, confusion and despair. Those who are from God are going to see just about everything differently than the world.

How is the viewpoint of those who are from God going to be different than the viewpoint of the world? First, the litmus test identifies a key difference. Those who are from God know that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. In other words, God has come to reveal himself and rescue humans from their plight. This causes us to differ from the world in several ways. It means that we know that God does exist. We don’t merely suspect it, wish it or hope it. We know it. And we know who he is and what he is like. No doubt you’ve heard the saying, “Seeing is believing.” There is a theological issue with that saying for Christians because 2 Corinthians tells us we walk by faith, not by sight. That means seeing is not believing, believing is believing. Nevertheless, we understand the saying very well.

Years ago Laurie and I were on vacation, sitting by the beach in Hawaii, when I noticed a small group of people standing nearby looking out at the ocean and occasionally pointing at something. It was obvious something had caught their attention. I got curious, so I walked over and asked what they were looking at. They said, “There’s a shark out there,” and pointed to an area where we had been swimming 10 minutes earlier. I looked, but saw nothing. I figured maybe they were just some skittish vacationers. Who knows what they saw? But I went and sat back down, and shortly I saw what was clearly a shark fin show up, moving around the area the people had indicated. Seeing is believing. I now believed without doubt there was a shark out there right where we had been swimming.

God understands that’s an aspect of human nature. So he gave us reason to believe. He revealed himself in a form people could see. We don’t believe God is real because we are gullible or like fairy tales that make us feel better. We believe because God showed himself in human history. Like I had no doubt about the existence of that shark, we need have no doubt about the existence of God, because he has shown up.

This takes us in a very different direction from those who have the viewpoint of the world. We know that God is real, he is good, that he loves us so much he paid an infinitely high price for us, that he brings grace and forgiveness to us. His truth tells us about what is important in life, how we should live, what kind of people he wants us to be. It tells us that there is absolute truth, there is right and wrong, and it tells us how to know right from wrong. His revelation of himself has given us hope, the knowledge that there is eternal life when our time on this planet is done, and that changes everything.

A second way people who are from God is different is that they are theocentric, while the world is anthropocentric. That means that people who are from God think about the world being centered around God, while the world sees it as being totally centered around people. That means the world only thinks about what people do. All that matters to people of the world is what humans do because they think that’s all there is. Those who are from God think things are about what God is doing. That is way more important and more powerful than the schemes and actions of human beings.

When Jerry and I were kids most of our childhood years were spent in a house on Hillside Drive in Bakersfield. It was a one block long suburban street on which lived a bunch of young boys around similar ages. We boys came up with all sorts of ways to entertain ourselves. At one point for some reason, they did road construction on our street. Watching those big tractors working on the road was fascinating for us boys. When the street was all dug up, for some reason we came up with the brilliant idea that we would set a trap for one of the road graders. I have no clue why we thought this was a good idea. I guess it’s just human mischievousness. Anyway, when the tractor went by headed up to the other end of the street we dashed out, and put out our trap made of rocks and sticks. Then we ran back into a place of hiding from which we could watch when the tractor fell prey to our brilliant scheme. Do you know what happened? Of course you do. That tractor hit our little “trap” and rolled over it like it wasn’t even there, leaving no trace that it had ever existed.

We who are from God understand that’s kind of like us humans in our native mischief making. We run around doing our mighty things, thinking we’re doing something big, but then the tractor of God’s plan comes rumbling along and rolls right over it. Being from God allows us to zoom out and see the world as it really is, to see that God is at work on an eternal plan that is much greater than anything humans are doing.

There is a personal aspect to the theocentric worldview. It is that those of us who are from God know that the world is not about us as individuals, it is about God and his glory. That means that we understand that what matters is doing God’s will and glorifying him. The world believes that all that matters is they be happy, that they get what they want in life. Those are two very different ways of living.

IMPLICATIONS

How do these things help us experience more fullness of life?

THEY GIVE CONFIDENCE

What we see in these verses is that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Christ is the answer to seeing is believing. We can live with confidence in our God. We know he is there, we know he loves us, we know he has accepted us into his kingdom, we know we have eternal life because of what Christ has done for us. We can be confident of it all.

We see in these verses that we can be confident that the enemy is powerless against the one who is in us. So we don’t need to fear his attacks against us or that he is somehow going to destroy or defeat us. We can know that God’s kingdom will not be defeated. We have every reason to be confident because we know God and the Spirit of Christ is in us. The confidence we have in our God will enable us to live remarkable lives.

THEY GIVE PEACE

These verses inform us we don’t need to fear Satan. We don’t need to fear what people are doing or what circumstances may come. God is at work. God makes us secure. His plan is moving forward, so we can trust in him and his work in our lives and in the world.

I believe that 2020 has a profound message for all of us. Our culture is trending more and more toward trying to give people security from the cradle to the grave. We have to have health insurance, car insurance, home owner’s insurance, earthquake insurance, life insurance, social security, retirement fund, disability insurance, long term care insurance, unemployment insurance and the rest. More and more we are moving in the direction of the Nanny State, in which the government will give us everything we need. But what is the message of 2020? It is that a microscopic virus can throw into utter chaos all of the human race’s great achievements. The best defense we advanced humans have against this disease is, don’t go near people and wear a mask, the same defenses we had 100 years ago. Oh, but wait, now we have a vaccine that will vanquish this disease. Uh, yeah, about that. What if some mutated form of the virus proves to be resistant to the virus? Could that happen? Of course, and if it does, we will be at the mercy of the virus. Beyond that, I am sure you’ve noticed that just since the beginning of this century we’ve had SARS, avian flu, swine flu and now the corona virus all brought to you by China. That’s 4 different viruses in the space of 20 years. Do you think this pandemic will be the end of that? Stay tuned. More to come.

My point is that if we try to ground our peace in human accomplishment and our own ability to try to secure ourselves from the disasters of life, we will never truly know a moment’s peace. Whatever temporary peace we might create will be continually threatened because we know it can be instantly vaporized by some new unforeseen disaster, or by a hopeless diagnosis or any number of attacks upon us. The hopelessly tenuous nature of that peace will itself destroy our peace.

The great news here is that we can have peace because God rules. God is at work and nothing can stop him. The combination of pandemic, riots, fires, murder hornets and elections in 2020 has caused some to feel like the world is spinning out of control. It has made many fearful about the future. But we do not need to fear. What we can do is be eager to see what God is up to, where he is going to take our world and us personally. That is what can give us hope and peace that nothing can shake.

THEY GIVE DIRECTION

These verses remind us that we don’t think the way the world thinks. Here’s a simple principle that we all should keep clear in our heads. If we think the way the world thinks, we will get the same results that the world gets. What results does the world get? Look around. People are searching, dissatisfied, restless and fearful. People are locked in endless rounds of conflict and violence. People feel something is missing in their lives and trying to fix whatever it is. They totally lack peace.

If we think the way the world thinks, where will we end up? We will end up searching, dissatisfied, restless, fearful, lacking peace and totally confused about why this is so. If we want something that the world is not gaining by it’s thinking, is it not obvious that we are going to have to think something different?

Have you heard of a buffalo jump? This refers to a site where there is a steep cliff. The native Americans used this as a method of hunting buffalo. Meriweather Lewis, of Lewis and Clark fame, described this in his journal. A member of the tribe would put on a buffalo skin robe and situate himself between a herd of buffalo and the cliff. The tribe would hide themselves in positions surrounding a herd of Buffalo. When a signal was given the tribe members would all show themselves and the decoy buffalo would run toward the cliff. The herd would be spooked and would all follow the decoy’s lead toward the cliff. The decoy would have prepared a safe hole to dive into at the edge of the cliff, but the buffalo would stampede right over the cliff, following the herd to their deaths. The largest buffalo jump in the world is the Ulm Pishkun Buffalo Jump in Cascade County, Montana. At the bottom of the cliff there are compacted buffalo bones 13 feet deep.

Sadly we humans are herd animals. We follow the herd, which is why the fashion industry even exists, for instance. It is all too easy for us to follow the herd right over the cliff. The herd is not finding the life that we long for or gaining eternal life. So we need to be different from the herd. If we follow them, we will share their destination.

God has given us direction. The way to live is not the way our world is going. It is to live for his purposes, his will and his glory. If we will choose that, even when it is hard, we will find that our lives have direction, they have purpose, they have meaning. We will know where we are going. Years ago our family took a trip up to Seattle on the train, a 36 hour trip. On our way back as the train was approaching the city of Martinez in the Bay Area, the conductor began making an announcement that everyone who was bound for Los Angeles needed to gather all their belongings and get off the train in Martinez. That included us, because we were going to LA where we would catch the train down to Oceanside. At first we didn’t do anything, because that made no sense. Why would I get off the train in Martinez? Surely they couldn’t mean that. But I asked an Amtrak employee and he affirmed we needed to get off the train. We arrived in Martinez, got off the train, then stood there on the platform, surrounded by a couple hundred other folks, and none of us had any idea why we were there or how we were going to get home. None of us wanted to be in Martinez. There was a lot of confusion, frustration and unhappiness. After we had been there for some time they made an announcement that another train would be arriving in a few minutes and we were to board that train. That train would take us to Bakersfield where we would then get on buses that would take us to LA. It turned out that there had been an earthquake down near LA, and there was concern that the track north of LA had been damage, so we had to go around that area.

I tell you that because when you don’t know where you’re going in life, you don’t know what the destination, the purpose is, and you don’t know why you’re where you are, you are going to have the same result that we had in Martinez. There is going to confusion, frustration and unhappiness. But if we will pursue God’s will above all else, live to bring him glory, live for his purpose, we will always have a sense of where we are going, we will know our mission, and that’s what fills a life with passion and meaning. That’s what makes life full.