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Rick Myatt

RIP TIDE

1 John 5:16-19

Dr. John Paul Stapp was an impressive man. He was the son of missionaries to Latin America who would earn a doctorate in biophysics, then go on and get an MD degree. He would go to work for the Air Force. In the 1950’s he was working on a project at Edwards Air Force Base up in the desert. He had an engineer working for him named Edward Murphy. At one point Murphy, after discovering an error that had been made by a junior technician, said about that technician, “if there’s a wrong way to do it, he will find it.” Stapp thought that was funny. He paraphrased the comment when dealing with the fact that in every project common mistakes were made. In an effort to head off such errors he said, “If anything can go wrong, it will go wrong.” He called it “Murphy’s Law,” and the rest is history.

Murphy’s Law is now well known because it seems to be an accurate depiction of how things go in this world. It feels like there is a frustrating perversity to life. Murphy’s Law has spawned numerous corollaries such as, “You never find a lost article until you have replaced it.” Or, “Matter will be damaged in direct proportion to its value.” In other words, the more valuable something is the greater than chance it will be damaged. Another classic is, “When dropped, a piece of bread will always land with the jam side down.” “If there are several things that can go wrong, the one that will cause the most damage will be the one to go wrong.”

I have my own personal corollary of Murphy’s Law. Maybe we could call it Rick’s Law. It goes something like this, “When I am driving, the green light up ahead will turn yellow, then red just as I am arriving.” I know everyone thinks the traffic signals are against them, but I have independent confirmation. Laurie has objectively observed this phenomenon and has commented on it repeatedly. She even suggests that if we are running late for something she should drive because what happens to me doesn’t happen to her. Recently my brother, Jerry, was in the car as I was driving and he said, “What is with you and yellow lights?”

Murphy’s Law is accepted in part because we feel like life is against us somehow. Underneath that sense that life is kind of against us is a truth that we will see in 1 John 5:16-19. Our sense that life is against us has a basis in reality. But there is a truth that can enable us to deal with this. It is truth that we need to be aware of if we are to live the full life God desires for us.

THERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS TO CLEAR UP

Verses 16-17 continue the theme John addressed in verses 14-15, which had to do with prayer. In those verses he said that if we ask anything in prayer that is according to God’s will, he will hear that prayer and answer. In these verses he gives a specific example of something that is according to God’s will. He tells us to pray for a brother or sister that is committing sin.

Clearly it is God’s will for us to not commit sin, so it makes sense that if we know a brother or sister is sinning, we should pray that they would change their ways. God will hear that prayer. However, John says something that has led to some controversy and confusion. He said we should pray for those who are committing sin that “does not lead to death.” Then he says there is sin that leads to death, and he clarifies that he is not telling us to pray about that. Uh oh. What is this sin that leads to death? It sounds ominous.

There are a couple of instances in the New Testament in which people’s sin resulted in their physical death. In Acts 5 a couple named Ananias and Sapphira tried to pull a fast one and lied to the church to make it look like they were way more generous than they actually were, and they both died as a result of their greed, dishonesty and hypocrisy. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul said some in the church had died because of the way they were trampling all over the Lord’s Supper.

Some suggest that is what John had in mind here. They say he meant there are sins that result in physical death like that. He says he is not telling us to pray for someone who is sinning in that way. But it doesn’t take much to figure out that can’t be what he meant. How would you know that someone was committing such a sin? What sins lead to death and which ones don’t? There is no list of such things anywhere in the Bible. Plus wouldn’t it make sense if someone was committing a sin that would cause death that we should pray for them even more to save them from their fate?

A more likely understanding is that John means there are some sins that are not fatal spiritually and some that are. In a sense, every sin leads to death because they all lessen life in us. But John is writing about something more severe and final. I believe that he had the false teachers that were causing problems in mind here. Their sin was rejection of Jesus Christ, and that has permanent consequences. It results in being cut off from God, which is what death ultimately is.

Is John saying we shouldn’t pray for those people? No, his point was that if we pray for those who are followers of Jesus but who are disobeying him some way, we can know that it is God’s will that they turn from those bad choices and live in the light again. That’s who we should be praying for. What about those who are rejecting Jesus? John isn’t really discussing them at this point.

Notice what John says we should do when we see a brother or sister committing sin. The reaction of many Christians is to think our job is to confront them, hold them accountable, help fix them. The flaw in that idea is that we are not the Holy Spirit. It is the work of God to transform people’s hearts. All humans can do is try to get them to conform their behavior to some standard. We can’t change their hearts. That requires a work of God’s Spirit and his grace. If we know for a fact that a brother or sister is directly violating a clear command of God, if they are stealing from someone for instance, that might be an occasion where we should confront them.

But John doesn’t have much confidence in our ability to fix people. He says what we should do is pray for them. He believes that is much more effective, for it brings the power of God and the Spirit of God into play, and in the end that’s the only way people’s hearts change. I have been dismayed in the past when I have had encounters with people who are solid Christians, leaders, who don’t think that praying for people is enough. They think that human intervention is the only hope and don’t seem to have faith that God can actually work in people’s lives. That’s a disturbing lack of faith.

The next question we have to clear up is in verse 18 where John wrote, “We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin.” That makes sense. However, some translations render that verse, “We know that no one born of God sins.” Unfortunately, that is a more accurate translation. But it is a problem. The fact is that people who have been born of God do sin. John earlier said that if we say we have no sin we delude ourselves and we call God a liar.

We have encountered this problem before back in chapter 3. Both there and here the NIV translators picked up on John’s use of present tense verbs that could be translated “keeps sinning.” They decided that must be what he meant. However, that is not how you would normally translate the Greek wording, which makes that a tad suspect as a solution. I think what John was doing was addressing the historical context that was behind the writing of this letter.

Particularly we saw back in 3:4 that John said, “sin is lawlessness.” The problem he was combatting in this letter was people who said they didn’t sin because God has not given any commands about how we live in this world. These people said God doesn’t care about that, he only cares about things in the spiritual world. All that matters to him is having the right arcane spiritual knowledge, which they claimed to possess. So there were no commands for them to obey.

This was lawlessness. It was saying there is no law that rules over me because I am spiritual through having my knowledge. So once again here, we could substitute the term “lawless” for the word sin, because sin is lawlessness. So John says, “We know that no one born of God is lawless.” This we understand. Those of us who believe in Jesus are born of God according to John. Do we sin? Unfortunately, yes we do. But if we are truly born of God, if we really believe in Jesus, we will never be lawless. We will not say, “I don’t care what God says. I do things my way.”

Laurie and I were recently talking about the future, usually a risky endeavor. We were discussing how uncertain it is, and we both admitted we were feeling uneasy about it. Listen to Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:34. “Do not worry about tomorrow.” Well, see, I’m not worrying, I’m just concerned. The dictionary defines “concerned” as “troubled, worried, or disquieted.” Fine, I was kind of worried. The problem is Jesus directly commanded us not to worry, and I was disobeying that command. He said not to let our hearts be troubled, and mine was. If I am violating something Jesus commanded me to do, what would you call that? A good theological term for it is “sin.” But I didn’t say, “I don’t care what Jesus said. I think worry is the way to go. I’m going to do things my way.” That is lawlessness. That is the sin that John said someone born of God will not do. Laurie and I agreed that we didn’t want to live troubled over the future, that we want to do what Jesus said, and we want to go through uncertainty and come out the other side able to say that we actually trusted God through all of it.

THERE IS A WARNING TO HEED

In verse 19 John says something that we all need to be more aware of because it is easy to forget. “The whole world is under the control of the evil one.” Wait, isn’t God the ruler of the world? Doesn’t he control things? Psalm 47:8 says, “God reigns over the nations. God is seated on his holy throne.” Ephesians 1:11 says God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” The New American Standard version of that is more accurate when it says God “works all things in accordance with the plan of his will.” Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” In other words, God even controls the flip of the coin.

Yes, God is in control. But in his divine, mysterious way, he allows Satan to roam the earth creating havoc. That started in Eden. Why does God let the devil do his dirty tricks? The true answer to that is, I don’t know, you’re going to have to ask him. My guess, and that’s all it is, would be that it has to do with wanting us to freely choose him. In order for God to give the first humans the ability to choose to love and obey him, there had to be an alternative, so he allowed Satan to offer one.

There is some pretty deep theological water there that is so far over my head I don’t want to wade into it today because I suspect I’d drown there. What we can know is that somehow God works his plan no matter what Satan does, but for now God has given Satan the freedom to operate, and he is the one who is behind the working of this world, by which John meant the world system.

That, in part, is why Murphy’s Law seems to ring true. Go back to Eden when Satan made his first appearance on stage. What was he trying to accomplish? Was he seeking to enrich the lives of the humans on the planet? Was he trying to make the world a better place? Was he doing all he could to strengthen the souls of the humans, to deepen them spiritually by giving them greater love for God? No, he did not want to do any of that. What he sought to do was convince the humans that they should not listen to God. He wanted them to believe God was devious, not to be trusted, and certainly not looking out for their best interest. He wanted to convince them that their best interest would be served by disobeying God, doing whatever seemed good to them. He was trying to rupture their connection with God, to absolutely foul God’s beautiful creation, and to cause the humans to experience death. He wanted to ruin them.

Do you think that Satan has changed his playbook? I read an article a couple of months ago about Nick Saban, the football coach at the University of Alabama. Now don’t misunderstand me, I’m not trying to suggest that Saban is Satan. Although, when you think about it, substitute a T for the B in Saban’s name and what do you have? That’s right, maybe that explains the absurd dominance he has had in college football the past 10 years. Just kidding. The article said that a few years ago Saban, not Satan, saw that college football was changing. His philosophy up to that point, one that had made him highly successful, was to build his teams on dominant defense and a powerful running game on offense. His quarterbacks were typically nothing special, because all he wanted them to do was not lose the game. He didn’t ask much of them. But he could see the game was trending toward much more powerful offenses, much more wide open football. His approach was not going to keep working. So he consulted with some other coaches, brought in some new assistants, and changed his philosophy. He began to stress more passing and much more offense. That is so true that this year his national championship team was one of the most prolific offenses ever to play the game. He saw that to keep winning, he was going to have to adapt and change, and he did. Do you think Satan has done the same thing? Has he changed his game plan? I submit to you that he has not. He knows his system works. So he continues using the same playbook he employed way back in Eden.

This is where Murphy’s Law comes into play. Why does the world seem so perverse at times? Why does it feel like the world is against us? It’s because ultimately when we say the world is against us, we are saying since God is the ruler of all, that means he’s against us. We may not put it in those exact words, but that’s what we feel. And if that’s what is happening then we surely are not going to trust him. If you know someone is against you, do you trust that person to look out for your good? No way.

Because of the disaster covid has caused in the airline industry, the past few months have been tumultuous for Michael, our son in law. A couple of times a year the airline has what they call a “displacement bid,” which is a chance for pilots to bid for new positions. They can ask to change either their aircraft, their base or their position, like moving from first officer to pilot. In the chaotic covid times they have been having displacement bids about every other month because of all the upheaval it has caused. Michael has been jerked around in his assignments in ways that are not supposed to happen according to the contract the pilots have with the airline. He ended up being based in New York. He is there now and won’t be able to come home until next month. Without listing the whole sad tale I will tell you that it has made him quite unhappy with his airline. He is being jerked around and the message is they have no care or consideration for him whatsoever. This illustrates what can happen to us. Satan seeks to use his perverse system to batter us. He will try to throw every hard thing, every curve ball he can think of to make life hard for us. The goal is to convince us that God, who rules over the world, has no care or consideration for us at all. This is exactly the line that he sold to Eve. God really doesn’t care about you, so don’t listen to him. You just take care of you, whatever you think that takes. That is what Satan wants you to do.

That doesn’t mean that everything that happens to us is bad. After all, God can work on our behalf and does. There is also another factor, and that is that Satan at times may think he can disrupt or even sever our connection with God by giving us just what we think we want. Life goes so good for us that we start thinking we don’t really need God. Remember, Satan’s goal is to distance you from God, and he will use whatever tactic he thinks will serve that purpose most effectively.

Satan does not just use events in our lives. Remember that as the god of this age he is the one who is pulling the levers that form the thinking of cultures. I’d like you to think of culture as a rip current. If you’ve ever been caught in a rip current you will know that it can make you feel helpless. It is frustrating and disturbing to swim with all your might against a current only to find you have made no progress. In fact, you’ve gone backward. The current is stronger than you are. It sweeps you where it is going and you usually cannot overpower it. That’s why they tell you if you get caught in one, don’t swim against it, but swim parallel to the beach until you get out of it. Culture does the same thing to us. But there is something interesting about rip tides. If you had no larger stationary reference points, like the beach, and all you had when in a rip current was the water right around you, being in one would feel like no big deal. It would simply feel like you are floating in the water. You only know that a rip tide is getting you in trouble by looking around and seeing where it is taking you in reference to fixed points farther away. But that rip tide is taking you into trouble, whether you know it or not. That’s also true of culture. Without a fixed reference point, the one that matters being God’s truth, you don’t realize that the culture is sweeping you away. Satan is the one who creates the current.

This is true everywhere. It always has been. Satan creates culture that always are aimed at drawing us away from God’s grace in Jesus Christ. We can see that in many cultures in the world. Throughout history there have mostly been cultures that seek to oppose and even wipe out the Christian faith. But it is not always that overt. Satan can be very subtle. He may even use religion as a dominant influence in a culture, but the religion will not be genuine faith in God’s grace in Christ.

When Toby graduated from high school he was part of a group that went on a mission trip to Fiji and Tonga. Yeah, I know. Tough duty. Where do I sign up for the mission trip to Bora Bora? Laurie went on the trip as one of the chaperones. Tonga was very different from Fiji. Tonga describes itself as a Christian kingdom. It is a kingdom, and it is unabashedly Christian. You would think that this, then, is one culture that draws people to Christ. Yet, what Laurie and Toby found was that what it tends to do is have people caught up in religion without the reality of the gospel of grace and its power in their lives. It *seems* like a positive Christian culture, but its effect in many cases tends to keep many from actually experiencing the grace of Christ.

Generally, culture in our world is shaped by our enemy, and its effect will always be to draw us away from God. So if people just go along and fit in with their culture, they will find themselves cut off from God. They may have religion. In many cases, they will. But what they won’t have is a genuine living connection to the true God.

It should be no surprise to you that this is overt in our particular culture. For example, Yale psychologist Paul Bloom says “when children are directly asked about the origins of animals and people, they tend to prefer explanations that involve an intentional creator, even if their parents are atheists.” Oxford University Psychologist John Barrett reports similar findings and says if a group of children “were put on an island and they raised themselves...they would believe in God.” Then he concluded, “It appears that we have to be educated out of the knowledge of God by secular schools and media.”

Another example of our culture’s current is that a fundamental premise of our society is that there are no absolutes, there is no one truth. Our cultural elites preach this message, and the vast majority of Americans would agree with the statement that truth is relative. Strangely, this ends up in the illogical and contradictory place of the leaders of our society having howling fits over things they consider wrong, of ostracizing people, of canceling them if they don’t adhere to the culture’s dogma, all while insisting there is no right or wrong. It’s really quite astounding. But you must remember one thing. Satan is insane. He thinks he can fight Almighty God and win. He has completely lost touch with reality. It is not reasonable to expect something created by an insane being to be consistent and logical. We should always expect our culture, really any culture, to have a certain amount of insanity in it. Ours is loaded with it. Our culture is absolutely determined to destroy itself. University of Pennsylvania sociologist, Philip Rieff, said our cultural leaders should more accurately be seen as terrorists. At this point, our culture is well on its way to self destruction.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Do you see any way that a person can buy into our culture and its beliefs, and also accept those assertions by Jesus? I do not. The dogma of our culture and the teaching of Jesus are complete opposites. To accept one is to reject the other. If you accept the dogma of our culture that there is no truth, then you must reject Jesus’ statement that he is *the truth*. If you accept the teaching of Jesus that he is the truth, you have, by definition rejected our culture’s dogma that there is no truth.

That is just one example. In myriads of ways, our culture seeks day after day to keep people from a real connection to God. You see it in its materialism, in its rebellion against authority, in its obsession with sex, its rejection of morality, its obsession with power, its rejection of the eternal realm, its pride, its fixation on fame and appearances, its desperate need for the approval of others, its insistence that our value is found in how we perform and what we produce, that worth is in what we possess. Every single day it is around us, pulling at us, telling us this is where life is found, and underneath it all is the message that God is not there at all, and anyone who believes in him is a fool.

But this passage is not bad news, it is very good news. Yes, Satan is causing big problems, but there is a hugely important statement in verse 18. John says of those who are children of God that “the One who is born of God (meaning Jesus) keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them.” The evil one cannot harm us! It would be easy to think that this unrelenting onslaught from our culture and these relentless attacks by Satan are going to overwhelm us. How can we survive? The great news is we are protected by the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings. Nothing can defeat him.

Remember I said that Satan will use the world system to batter us, to make life so hard for us that we become convinced that God either does not care about us at all or that maybe he’s not even there. Never forget that Satan has limits. God is keeping us safe. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted he will provide a way out so that you can endure it.” God will not let Satan do so much that it would overwhelm you and destroy you. That’s true both of his attempts to overwhelm us with trials and hardships, and his efforts to swamp us by culture.

There is a battle going on in the spiritual realm that we cannot see. If we could see it we would know that whatever Satan is able to do to us is only a fraction of what he would like to do. If he had his way, our lives would be an unrelenting, unlivable hell. What keeps that from happening is God is keeping us safe from those unimaginable attacks. Were God not protecting us from the evil one, what we experience in this world would be infinitely worse.

God will also keep us safe from the influence of the rip tide we are in. The culture is trying to carry us away. On our own strength we are going to be in trouble. But we are not on our own. When my son, Toby, was in college he used to surf up on the central coast around Pismo Beach and Morro Bay. One day he was out with some buddies and there was a big swell. At one point he noticed a guy, not one of his friends, near the pier at Pismo struggling with his board in the big surf, and it looked like he was getting into trouble. Toby paddled over near him and asked, “Hey, are you all right?” The guy said, “I’m having a rough time here and I’m really getting tired.” Toby asked, “Do you need help?” The kid said, “Yeah, I really do.” So Toby paddled next to him and told him to just hang onto his board. Then he paddled in to shore bringing the guy with him. The kid was very relieved and hugely grateful. If we try to fight the rip tide on our own, we’re going to get swept away. But God is with us. If we will keep looking to him, he will take us to safety.

CONCLUSION

PAY ATTENTION TO THE WARNING SIGNS

In Hawaii they have signs posted at many of the popular beaches. One common sign says, “Warning: Slippery Rocks. You could fall and be seriously injured.” In the middle is a picture of a person falling over backwards. Laurie and I actually saw that happen. We were on a beach where there was a patch of rock in the shallow water. We saw this guy try to walk over those wet rocks to go snorkeling, and his feet shot out from under him. He went down painfully. Another sign warns of dangerous shore break and shows a guy being tossed by a wave onto his head. A third common sign says, “Warning: Strong Current. You could be swept away from shore and could drown.” That’s the one we should all be paying attention to.

I’m not talking about when you go to the beach. I’m talking about when you get up in the morning you need that sign. You are going into the water of this world, and you will experience a strong current. It can sweep you away. It is the current of the way of this world. There are 3 things we should do.

First, know that the current is there. It never goes away. It is there every moment. It is coming to you through people, relationships, news, entertainment, schools, politics, expectations, peer pressure. It is relentless. The biggest danger of a rip current is that you don’t realize it is there and what it is doing. So be aware always.

Second, we need to know that this current has a purpose. It is intended to cause you to doubt God, to question whether he is even there, or if you know he is, to question both that he knows what is best for you and seeks what is best for you. It is designed to get you to go your own way independent of God. Never, ever lose sight of the fact that the goal of the world’s system is to destroy you. It is not intended to enrich your life, to make you more joyful and hopeful. It is intended to create frustration, bitterness, hopelessness and death.

Third, we need to identify the current. We need to think critically. We need to ask as we get messages from people and from our culture, what is the basis of what we are hearing? Is this based on God’s truth, or is it contrary to God’s truth? Is it from God or Satan? What are its presuppositions and where do they come from? Is this pointing me to Jesus and his grace, or is it pulling me away from him?

Sometimes it can be subtle. Laurie and I were watching a show on TV called Hawaii Hunters. Each episode features a couple or an individual looking to buy a home in Hawaii. It follows them as they look at a few options. In one episode one guy said to his wife as they sat on their patio of their new home looking out at a beautiful island scene, “This is the life. I’ve dreamed of this for years. It doesn’t get any better than this.” There’s nothing anti-Christian about that. It isn’t obviously spiritual. It certainly doesn’t seem demonic in any way. But consider what that says. Looking at the scene I thought the guy was right. That does look to me like the life. But that statement says that real life is found in relaxing in a beautiful place. That’s what we should aspire to, and that nothing is as good. Behind that is the premise that life is about serving yourself and the best of it comes from a circumstance and knowing God is not relevant to the issue. I don’t want to make too much of this, but all of the thinking behind that statement ultimately comes right out of Satan’s playbook. It draws us away from God. It is about blinding us to the fact that real life is found in knowing God, glorifying him, and in loving and serving others. It is easy to miss all of that and get sucked in to the illusion, which will prove empty.

TRUST IN YOUR RESCUER

There will be times when your life feels like the embodiment of Murphy’s Law. Things you didn’t even know could go wrong are going wrong. Each day brings new helpings of discouragement and disappointment. It feels like God isn’t there, or if he is, he’s working against you. That’s time to recognize what is going on. Satan is playing that same old “you can’t trust God, because he doesn’t care about you” card. It is time to trust God is still seeking your best.

Remember my story of Toby helping a young surfer in trouble. The only way that young guy was going to get out of his dangerous situation was to rely on Toby to help him and take him to safety. He couldn’t do it himself. We also have a rescuer, a Savior who will get us out of danger. John reminds us he will keep us safe.

What it means is that we must live in his presence, trust in his grace always, and to listen to his voice. We must not doubt his goodness, his love, his wisdom and his guidance. We must believe that what he says is true and that he always has our good in mind. So we trust in what he is doing in our lives, we seek to follow his direction at all times, and we trust in him to protect us and give us the strength to stand. We ask him to tow us to safety in the face of the pull of the current.