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Two More Litmus Tests of True Belief (1 John 2:7-14)

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Now that we are into March and the busyness of the session picks up, I want you to know that at our weekly gathering, we regularly pray for all General Assembly members as well as staff who need strength, wisdom and clarity to make it through such hectic days. My hope is that, even if your schedule doesn't allow for you to attend our Bible study and prayer time, you might be able to read these notes when time permits and that you will receive encouragement from God's Word.

Chemists use litmus powder to identify the true makeup of a solution. The word litmus, though, has come to mean a particular standard by which we measure someone's opinions or points of view. If they meet the litmus test, they are acceptable to us and vice versa.

John has been applying litmus paper several times throughout this letter of 1 John. He has taught that the true follower of Jesus walks in the light of Christ (holiness) and not in darkness (sin) in 1 John 1:7. In 1:9, he says that confession of sin characterizes the believer. Obedience to God's commands is another indication (1 John 2:3-6). Today, we will see two more realities that are observable in the lives of those who have true, saving faith.

I. THE LITMUS TEST OF LOVE (2:7-11)

1 John 2:7-11 - Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

This commandment to love is presented in an interesting way. In one sense, John says this is nothing new. The command to love was something any Jewish person in first-century Palestine would have been very familiar with, since it is grounded in Old Testament law. This "old" concept of love and law is reinforced in the New Testament as well:

Romans 13:8-10 - Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the

law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

James 2:8 - If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well.

The newness of the commandment to love was instituted by Jesus himself. It doesn't mean that love has a new definition or is new chronologically, but that the quality of love that we should have is fresh, replacing a type of love that is in need of some fresh motivation and power.

John 13:34, 35 - A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Love will characterize followers of Christ. That's what sets them apart from a world of selfishness or even other "faiths" that preach hatred and sanction aggression, sometimes to the point of murder. Jesus came to fulfill the old commandment of love and gave the same command in a fresh, new way.

Notice here who is to be loved. John says we are to love and not hate our brother. This is written to true believers in Jesus who are walking in his light. The recipients of the love in this passage are other believers. You would think that a warning against hate in a family would be unnecessary, but some of the most vile hatred can come from people who claim to follow Christ directed to others in the church. Anyone who does this, according to these verses, is not walking in the light and should seriously evaluate where they are spiritually.

I HAVE DECIDED TO STICK WITH LOVE. HATE IS TOO GREAT A BURDEN TO BEAR. (MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.)

II. THE LITMUS TEST OF GROWTH (2:12-14)

1 John 2:12-14 - I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

Maryland

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*I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.
I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.
I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.*

From time to time, as you read New Testament epistles, you will find sections that are written in a poetic form, possibly because they were used as hymns in the first-century church. These three verses are presented this way and may have been shared among Christians in a song.

Three basic categories of people are addressed here in this section, referring to age groups. But John is not speaking of chronological ages necessarily. He is writing to a wide range of people who are along a spectrum of maturity in their Christian faith.

John begins by writing to little children. These would be those who have just begun their journey with Christ and haven't had much teaching. They have tasted of the excitement and newness of knowing Christ and being assured their sins are forgiven. A beginner in the family of God will naturally want to know more and receive more and more of God's teaching:

1 Peter 2:2, 3 - Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

The category "young men" is directed toward those who have been moving along in their faith, learning more about the Lord and what he has revealed in his Word, and have had some success in gaining victory over sin. Overcoming the evil one is no small thing and as we progress in our walk with Christ, we should experience a greater degree of saying "no" to the Enemy's temptations.

Ephesians 4:14, 15 - ...so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

John also refers to fathers, or those who have seen even more maturity in their Christian walk. Years of building discernment takes dedication and patience, but that kind of growth is possible, as John shows us. The mature follower of Jesus understands the nature of life well, and sees purpose in suffering while grasping the difference between the transitory and the eternal.

Philippians 3:8 - Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

Hebrews 5:14 - But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

When a person accepts Christ's death and resurrection by faith for their salvation, we have seen that a certain litmus test will be passed as their life is observed. This is the growth that John has just described as believers move along the path to greater and greater spiritual maturity.

The theological term for this kind of growth is sanctification, which is the lifelong pursuit of living life as Jesus does, never quite attaining his perfection, but becoming more like him. This is the growth Peter and the author of Hebrews had in mind when they wrote

2 Peter 3:18 - But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Hebrews 12:14 - Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

A good final prayer for this study can be found in the salutation of a letter Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. May it be true of us as we see the need to not only love as Jesus loved, but also grow in our understanding and experience of who he is, changing us from the inside out.

2 Thessalonians 1:3 - We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.