

Surviving the Sifting

a sermon in the series
Life in the Son

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at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.
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I John 2:18-19

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

The writers of the books of the New Testament always had a practical reason for writing, which served as the motivation for why they wrote. It wasn't to write theology books, the doctrinal teaching served the practical, they wrote to be a help to the reader.

Theology always has a practical end, if it's biblical theology. It is to bring instruction in godliness, correction of behavior, encouragement of faith and exaltation of worship.

In this epistle the Apostle John has already given us some very heavy doctrine and he'll give us some more before we get done. In our text today he eludes to the doctrinal dispute that was happening in some of the early churches and evidently happening in the church to which John was writing. The doctrinal dispute was over the teaching of the Gnostics. There were two major strings of Gnosticism. One taught against the divinity of Jesus Christ, saying Jesus was only a mere man and at His baptism the Spirit of the eternal Son of God came upon Him but left at the crucifixion. The other string of Gnosticism came against Jesus' humanity. They upheld His deity but said the body men saw was a phantom body, it wasn't real, so Jesus didn't really die on the cross.

These two forms of Gnosticism were spreading and John confronted it. How could any of this theological, doctrinal stuff, which many of you I'm sure call boring, have any practical help to the church? Much and in many ways.

Here's why: Doctrines are truth claims. Life simply cannot be whole or wholesome without truth. Truth is as necessary to life as the air you are now breathing. Without truth there could not be life. There is an order in nature and the material world; there is also order in the spiritual realm. Your physical body works according to order, so shouldn't the spiritual as well? Absolutely. Life has to have some foundation, moral order, otherwise life becomes a chaotic free-for-all and aimlessness becomes the purpose.

Let me explain. If you say, “there is no truth”, then you’ve just contradicted yourself, because to say “there is no truth” is a truth claim. It’s asserting a truth. If you say all truth is relative and all religions basically get you to the same place, you’ve just shown ignorance because every religion is a truth claim that excludes all other religions. Truth by nature cannot be inclusive—include everything—it must be by nature be exclusive—exclude certain things that are not truth. That’s the way truth works. If everybody is right and nobody is wrong then there’s no truth. But then you’re right back where we started: when you say there is no truth that is a truth claim. You just cannot have a world without truth.

If there is a moral, absolute truth—and there is—then you need to know and apprehend it. Truth will always lead you to the person of Jesus Christ because truth is a person. Moral order is not like the law of nature. The laws of nature have no morality. Big lions eat smaller animals, they kill, they slay. There is nothing right or wrong about that; it’s the way God made it. But in human beings, there has to be moral order otherwise we’ll just kill each other off. The laws of nature have no morality, but laws governing persons have to come from a person. If there is evil, there has to be good. If there is good and evil, there has to be a moral order and if there is moral order there has to be a lawgiver. A person. That person is Jesus Christ.

Pilate asked the infamous question to the very Truth that stood before him, “What is truth?” and then we read, “And when he had said this he went out again into the Jews.” In other words, Pilate turned his back to the Truth and went his own way. Friend, when you reject Jesus Christ, the Truth, you do so at your own peril and you will reap the consequences. You cannot reject Truth.

If I reject the truth of gravity and leap off the church roof, no matter how much I deny it, there will be consequences. When you reject Christ there are consequences. That’s why doctrine is important—it’s truth. It’s the revelation of God’s moral order. These truths that we find in this book are God’s revelations of Himself and how we are to relate to Him and to one another, but there is another reason why this doctrinal dispute and John’s approach to it is so important. Remember John’s objectives in writing the epistle. First, John says in I John 1:4, that his first objective was to fill the believers’ cup of joy.

He wants to fill our cups of joy so we have joy to the maximum.

“These things we write to you that your joy may be full.”

Second, John wrote this epistle to fill believers’ cup of assurance and perseverance, I John 5:13,

“These things I’ve written to you that you may believe in the Son of God, that you may have eternal life, and you may continue to believe in the Son of God.”

Here in our text today, verses 18 and 19 he’s told us about the last hour and the antichrist and people leaving the church. Here is my question to you: what is so joyful and persevering about antichrists and people leaving the church? There is nothing joyful about either of those subjects

but both prove something to us that will produce great joy. They prove perseverance.

John wants to assure the hearts of the members of this church of whom he is writing that because they have withstood these false truth claims, because they have resisted the teaching of the Gnostics and have not departed and left Christ or the church, they are indeed the children of God. Perseverance proves sonship. Note how the apostle begins verse 18, "Now little children," he doesn't use the term 'little children' as he did earlier in the chapter to talk about the first stage of Christian maturity, but rather he means it as a term of endearment. He's like a dad, these are his spiritual kids and he feels responsibility of parenting them spiritually, so he says to them, "My little children". There is no doubt that this church is saved, that the people there that have remained are God's people.

Let's see how John works this out to our joy here today. I want everybody to leave who is saved, joyful. If you're not saved and you're not going to be this morning, I want you to leave miserable. That's my goal. I don't want you happy in your sin; I want you to be miserable in your sins so that you will seek deliverance from them. But you can leave here today joyful with me by embracing the Truth, Jesus Christ.

First I want to direct your attention to

I. A Prophetic Hour

"Little children, it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18a).

A. The Last Hour.

This is an amazing statement realizing it was written almost 2,000 years ago. Two thousand years ago, John takes quill in hand and says, "It's the last hour". If John would have written that today we would have set him up with a TV network and a book contract. We would have him draw it all out on a chart and show us why at anytime Jesus is getting ready to return. Because when we hear the term 'the last hour' we always think of the immediacy and pending return of Jesus Christ.

John said 2,000 years ago it was the last hour; this is not uncharacteristic of New Testament terminology. The term 'last days', 'last hour' and 'the end of the age', are all terms New Testament writers use to describe the time between the ascension of Christ to the return of Christ. We're living in the last days.

Look at Hebrews 9:26, "He then would have had to suffer often, since the foundation of the world but once at the end of the ages He's appeared to put away sin at the sacrifice of Himself."

So when Christ died, His death inaugurated the beginning of the last days.

In Hebrews 1:2, he backs it up beyond the cross back to the birth of Christ. "As in these last days,

God spoke to us by His Son.” God sent His Son, so Christ coming into the world becomes the marker by which the clock of the last days begins.

In Acts 2:17 in the famous sermon of Peter on the Day of Pentecost, he cites the prophet Joel, “And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, I’ll pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.”

When was the Spirit supposed to be poured out? The last days. So we’re there.

If it was the last hour then, where are we 2,000 years later? We could very well be in the last minute or we could be at half-past the hour. I think this prophetic hour, of which John speaks, suggest only one thing, the thing Jesus said about His return: “Of that day and hour, no one knows.”

Every generation has believed they were the last generation. That’s why Peter said that in the last days scoffers were going to come and say, “Where is the appearance of His coming? Two thousands has ticked off the clock of prophecy. Where is He? Surely He would have come by now if He was coming.” Isn’t that what scoffers say? How does Peter answer? “Two thousand years? Ah, that’s nothing to the Lord. That’s like two days. A day is like a thousand years to the Lord. Don’t you understand that God is longsuffering, not willing that any should perish but all come to repentance? God has waited to return because He’s got people He wants to see saved; He doesn’t want to see anybody perish.”

How many times has the heart of God thought, “If I come now, so-and-so will perish. I can’t come now. No, they’ve got to be brought in.” But every generation has had its soothsayers and prognosticators declaring the end. We’ve had our fair share, haven’t we? Why last May one man said the world was supposed to end and when it didn’t happen that day in May he revised it and said it was December, and when December came and rolled around he decided he better quit and he has since laid aside his prognostication of God’s return. He finally wised up, but he’s 90-something, you would think he would have gotten there a lot sooner.

I don’t know when Jesus is coming back. If every generation has looked around and saw signs of the return of Christ, things Jesus has said would happen—earthquakes, plagues and rumors of war—what can we say? Well, we could say He is about to return or it may be another 2,000 years before He returns. The only answer is, be ready.

God has great mercy for every generation because He has allowed signs of His return to appear in every generation. If the signs of His return did not reoccur in every generation, then men would succumb to laziness and apathy and would cease to look for His return. That’s why John could say it was the last hour 2,000 years ago. He wanted them to be ready. That’s why in 1100 A.D. that generation could say, “This is the last hour”, because He wanted them to be ready. And that’s why you can say here in the 21st Century it’s the last hour, because you must be prepared for His return.

We know it's the last hour because of:

B. Antichrist and Antichrists

Look again at verse 18, "And as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know it is the last hour." There is coming to earth one person, a person Paul calls a man of lawlessness; he will be the epitome of the spirit of antichrist in one person. I do believe there is going to come a person on the scene of human history who will be the embodiment of evil, possessed by Lucifer himself, and he will be known as the man of sin. We will talk more about him in our study through Revelation when we get to the thirteenth chapter of that book so you'll have to come to hear more about him then. But John says there are many antichrists. In I John 2:22, the verses that follow our text, says "Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son." You don't have to wait for this world leader to come on the scene; anybody who denies Jesus and the Father is antichrist.

In I John 4:33, he says, "Every Spirit that does not confess that Jesus has come in the flesh is not of God and this is the spirit of antichrist." Who is he talking about? These Gnostics. That brand of Gnosticism, which said Jesus didn't have a real body but it was just a phantom, is antichrist. One day it will be localized in one person, but even now the spirit of antichrist is among us.

John says in his second epistle verse seven, "For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming into the flesh, this is a deceiver and antichrist." John is saying anybody that rejects Jesus Christ, who will not bring his life into submission to Jesus Christ, is an antichrist.

C. An Hour of Testing

This last hour is an hour of testing and this is the hour you and I live in. Friends, we are being tested, and sometimes we don't understand the tests. We don't understand why half your colon had to be removed, my dear brother, in order to find no cancer. But all of these struggles, all of these difficulties, all of these challenges, are tests: we will remain faithful to God even when we don't understand His ways? Even when His ways seem to be harsh, even when it seems He doesn't love us at all? Will we remain faithful to what He has said, knowing that what He has said is true?

It is not just a test of temptations and trials, but it is a doctrinal test as well. It seems that the spirit of deception has come upon this 21st Century. Every wind of doctrine has been taught at one time or another and now what are men doing? Repackaging them. I'm reading a book right now by Ravi Zacharias, "Why Jesus?" and he goes into the 'New Spirituality', he calls it "weastern," the blending of the western and eastern religions. Men and women like Deepak Chopra and Oprah Winfrey who have taken a little of this and a little of that and have made a kind of hybrid spirituality. These are just some of the tests.

I received a phone call a few weeks ago that broke my heart. It was from a pastor whom I've known for the last several years. He called me and said, "Brother Michael, I'm really going through a difficult time. I'm questioning everything concerning my faith. I don't think I'm a Baptist anymore, my views about baptism have even changed." All I could do was plead with him, ask him to read certain things, but here is a solid young man, you would have never tempted me to believe that could stray in any way from doctrinal purity, yet I fear that thing is happening. This is a time of testing. Even good men can be made to stumble.

II. A Church Sifted

John tells us in verse nineteen that the church is being sifted. Now why would God do this?

"They went out from us but they were not of us for if they were of us they would have continued with us, but they went out so they might be made manifest that none of them were of us."

Although the text does not refer to Christ as doing the sifting, it is implied. How do I know that?

A. The Providential Purpose of Sifting.

"But they went out that they might be made manifest, that it might be shown that they weren't of us" (1 John 2:19). Somebody is doing this showing and it's God Himself. The Bible teaches through John the Baptist that Jesus Christ came with something in His hand, a winnowing fork. Most of us don't know what that means, because we live in a day of modern technology where combines not only collect the harvest but at the same time sifts the harvest.

If you've ever been on a farm and have watched the combine, you will have noticed there is a pipe that shoots out the grain into a large bin behind the combine. But there is another pipe that goes out beside it and it blows out all the waste. So while the grain is being harvested it is at the same time being sifted; the good, from the bad.

In the days of Jesus and John, they didn't have combines; it was all done by hand. So you'd reap the harvest and cut the grain down by the stalk and you'd take the head of grain and separate it from the stalk. That was the first process of sifting. Then you would put pressure on the grain to loosen the hull that held the grain and take your winnowing fork on a good windy day and throw it up in the air and let the wind blow the chaff away. The grain would fall on the chaffing floor and you'd sweep it up and there was your harvest.

John the Baptist says of Jesus that a winnowing fork would be in His hand and he would purge His own, separating the genuine from the false. Jesus sifts His own church. Why? To show there are some in the church who are not real Christians. This is not about Christians leaving a church. Sometimes believers of a local church will leave. Some of you have left a church to come here. We're not talking about that. What would you feel if the Sunday after you left they got up and read this text? This is not about you or Christians leaving but false Christians, men and women

professing faith in Christ but who are not genuine.

Jesus must come into a local church and sift the disingenuous from the genuine and He does this by fire. By trials and by demonic spirits. Yes, God uses demonic spirits to deceive those who would believe a lie. John says, "They went out from us but they weren't of us." They were not genuine believers. They had the appearance, they had the speech, just like the Gnostics. The Gnostics came in and the people accepted them at the first because they looked very spiritual, they sounded spiritual and they had wonderful gifts of teaching. Many of these men were not laymen, they were actual teachers and preachers who had come into the church preaching but their preaching became like poison. Many people who had made false professions began to adhere to these false teachers and thereby God was to sifting and showing who was really His and who was not His. The truth became a winnowing fork in the hand of the Master. Why does He do this? To purify the church.

God takes His church seriously. And if He does, I should too. God is serious about this church. There are a lot of churches—and I don't say this to boast of us—which I don't think the Spirit of God even goes near. By and large they are apostate, their doctrine is false, they've rejected the gospel, or they've turned liberal. God is not there. Ichabod is written over the door.

However, those who ascribe to the doctrine, to the teaching of the Apostle John, adhere to Christ and remain faithful to the truth claims of Scripture, God takes an interest in. You identify yourself with Him and He allows every one of us, including me, to be sifted. You see, good grain gets shifted along with the chaff. All of it gets sifted.

B. The Doctrinal Nature of Sifting.

This sifting was not about non-essential doctrines. I'm not talking about us having disagreements about whether the 144,000 are Jews appointed to preach the gospel during the tribulation period, or if it's simply an apocalyptic symbol representing the redeemed. That's a nonessential—it has nothing to do with heaven and your salvation. If you want to have the second horn on the second head of the beast to be whatever you want it to be, fine. I don't care. It has nothing to do with my salvation or yours. But these are essential doctrines John is dealing with; we're dealing with the very person of who Christ is and what salvation really is. That's something to divide over. Anything less than that isn't worth it and does harm to the body of Christ.

You all know what I believe about the Bible. That I am and don't have any hesitation saying that I am of an evangelical strain of Calvinism, much like Spurgeon. But you don't have to believe like me on that issue to be a member of this church. Why? Because it's not essential to you being saved. Some of you may be a mid-triber, a post-triber or a pre-triber; and some of you have no ideal what I'm talking about. That's okay—it's not essential to your salvation. But when it comes to who Christ is, when it comes to the authority of this Book, when it comes to how one is born again by the Spirit of God—not of works but by grace through faith—dear friend, we cannot tolerate compromise. There can be none.

III. Test of Faith

A. Perseverance After Sifting is a Test of Faith

This is what John is proving that will produce joy and assurance in the hearts of true believers. Perseverance after sifting is a test that you are a genuine believer. Every one of you, saved and unsaved, has been sifted. If you persevere, you stay with Christ, you stay in the church, you have given evidence that you are truly a child of God. John says in verse 19, “For if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.” There it is. Perseverance, staying with it. Not packing your bags and leaving, not getting afraid and cutting bait, no staying in there even though it was difficult is proof you are a Christian.

I have a warning: don't think because your doctrine is right you have no concern. Yes, this was a doctrinal issue, but because your doctrine is right doesn't mean necessarily mean you are a saint or child of God. There are doctrinal apostates and there are lifestyle apostates. The Gnostics were doctrinal apostates. They were doctrinally wrong and therefore weren't Christians. But you can have right doctrine and not live what you confess. There is no difference. A man may cling to his doctrine but his practice not conform, and the result is the same as a doctrinal apostate. He's an antichrist because he's living contrary to Jesus.

We all are sifted and if you remain faithful in doctrine and in practice then you can leave here today joyful—you are one of God's elect, one of His redeemed, one of His children.

B. Perseverance is a Gift From God.

It's part and parcel of salvation. I'm going to show how He keeps His people next week. But today, let it be known that to be saved and to stay saved is a gift of the grace of God. You can't take any more credit for staying saved than you can for getting saved. We're kept by God's grace, not saved by our perseverance. How many times I have been misunderstood because of my biblical views on the security of the believer. People have accused me of having stated it is our perseverance that is saving us. No! Never have I believed, thought or said that. I have said what the Bible says, “If you endure to the end, you are saved.” In other words, it is perseverance to the end that declares, makes it manifest that you are one of God's people.

And so, God sifts His own people. He puts them through fire and floods; He takes them through deserts, dark valleys, and through illnesses. He takes them through relationships gone shipwreck, He takes us through rebellious children. He takes us through financial upheaval and stormy seas of dreams unfulfilled, of hopes and aspirations dashed on the rocks of reality. God takes His people through almost every conceivable hardship. He throws them in lion's dens and fiery furnaces, but if they are God's people they always endure. Why? Because endurance is a gift of grace.

There is one trial more difficult than all tests and trials. It's not fiery furnaces or lions dens or martyr's stakes. It's not financial difficulties nor floods or fires, it's sin. Your sin.

I know of no test more severe than my own sin. I've never been more challenged than when I have sinned against God knowingly. Let me give you an illustration.

He was the beloved of God, even from a young man. He kept his father's sheep and as a young lad, faced down a bear and slew him with his own bare hands. The same happened with a lion. He would testify as an older teenager, God delivered the bear and lion into his hands. When even the king who stood head and shoulders above every other Jewish man in the army trembled in his tent when Goliath roared like a lion in the valley, "Who will challenge me?" David heard it and laughed. He did more than laugh though; he entered into the conflict with Goliath. He went into the valley with a slingshot. The giant was clad from head to foot in armor. But David said, "Today God is going to deliver you into my hands and this day I am going to separate your head from your body and your body will be food for the birds of the air. For the battle is the Lord's." Once again, God came on the scene and a shepherd boy killed a man of war dead as a doornail.

The favor of God was on this young man. Saul elevated him to be a captain and the Bible continues to tell us how the grace of God worked in David's life so that the young ladies would chant, "Saul has killed his thousands, but David his tens of thousands," That began the jealous envy of Saul and the pursuit of David as a criminal in the wilderness. For almost 10 years he was pursued and hunted down, but God delivered him every time. Finally the prophecy of Samuel came to pass, the anointing oil was now followed with a crown on his head: He was made king. And as king David's glory and empire spread. He was the talk of all the palaces of the known civilizations of his day. God was with him in everything he did and he would sit forth with his harp and his pen and he would write some of the most majestic hymns. You read them in the book of Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters." Oh, what beautiful poetry the young man could write. But one day, in the cool of the evening he looks out from his palace window and he sees a young lady taking a bath. And in this righteous man, whose heart was after God's heart, lust was conceived and you know the rest of the story. He took her and had his way with her. No, he didn't force himself on her. She was compliant and a child was conceived.

You'd think it would stop there, that sin would be enough to wake the conscience of this righteous man and say, "What have I done? Oh, God, how could I have sinned? I have sinned against you, please forgive me." But no, the treachery of sin weaves its web more and more over the heart of David making his heart calloused and hard. So he plots her husband, Uriah's, death and has him murdered. This is God's man. This is the young man in the valley who killed the giant. This is the same one who was preserved through Saul's jealous rage and was hunted down like a dog. One miracle after another. And now he has not just committed adultery and conceived a child out of wedlock but he has murdered a man.

One day the prophet comes, sent by God, and confronts David publicly. We see David humped over, probably prostrate on the floor crying out, "Have mercy upon me, oh, God. Have mercy. Wash me and I'll be white. Cleanse me with hyssop" (Psalm 51). You see David clinging to God, and you would say David returned to God. But David was with God all along because God had

never left David.

David was clinging to God because God had been clinging to David. That's perseverance. That's continuing with Christ because Christ continues with you. God fights for His people. He does not fight to allow them to stay in their sins; He fights to bring them out of their sin, to deliver them out of the trap they have fallen into. Some of you have fallen into the traps of sin, I've watched you. We've been there with you. But you're still with us. Some of you have been challenged and tempted in terrible ways and some have even given into those ways, but I want to remind you: where are you this morning? You're with God's people and with God today because God fought for you and wouldn't turn you loose. God fights for His people and keeps them.

Some of you are going through some challenges today. Some of you are being tested, you're questioning many things, even God Himself you've questioned. But I ask you: where are you today? You're with His people today and God is still with you because He's not turned loose of you. You may have fallen but you've not been forsaken; you may have failed but God has not failed—His promises endure and are true today. He knows His own and He will keep them.

As sad as it was that some have left the church under false teachings believing lies, and antichrists were running loose and rampant among the people of God, do you see why I say this text is meant for joy not tears? This text is meant for happiness not sorrow, because God's people will endure and they that endure to the end will be saved. Because when God saves you, sir, it is eternal. May God be praised and be thanked. Amen.