

Are You Sure?: Don't Lie to Yourself

1 John 2:18-27

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Dan Hoffman

In his 1991 movie "Hook", Steven Spielberg tells a story of how the unimaginable has happened. Peter Banning, played by Robin Williams, is a selfish workaholic. He's a realist and a lawyer who has almost no relationship with his wife or kids. But more than that he has completely forgotten that 30 years ago he was Peter Pan.

It's only when, on a family trip to London where Peter's children get kidnapped that Peter is forced to come to grips with a reality he would much prefer to ignore.

A ransom note, signed by Captain Hook, is the only clue left behind and Peter is at a loss until Granny Wendy pulls him aside and explains that he must remember who he is. "The stories are true" she says. But Peter can't accept it. He won't believe until he is very unwillingly forced into Never Never Land; the place where magic is real, children do not grow up and people can fly. But best of all, it's all based on a true story.

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Good morning and welcome to Fort George. And welcome to those of you who are joining us online. If you are new with us, we have been walking through 1st John for the last several months. It's a short letter near the end of the Bible with a profound message. Jesus' youngest disciple wants his readers to know that they know Jesus.

If you've got a Bible handy please open it up to 1 John chapter 2. We are going to pick it up in verse 18 and go through to verse 27. Would you stand with me as we come before God's word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read 1 John 2:18-27]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

We looked at the first half of this text two weeks ago, but I wanted to hit it again because of how foundational it is for Christina faith, and also because I want to draw out some of the strange wording John uses that we might write off as an overstatement when actually it's the point.

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So in revoew John gives us three tests that we can run on ourselves if we want to know that we know Jesus. And today's passage contains the third of these tests.

The first test was the character test where we find that real Jesus followers give themselves to doing what Jesus commands. So if you don't care at all about what Jesus commands, then you aren't a Jesus follower. Alternatively, if you give yourself to learning what Jesus commands, and repent when you fall short, striving to step towards holiness, it's because Jesus' Spirit is in you. The character test is the first test you can run on yourself if you want to know that you know you know Jesus.

The second test John gives is the love test. So if you claim to love Jesus but aren't interested in loving His bride or His children it's probably because you don't actually love Jesus. Like if you love me, but you can't stand Nikki, I'm probably not that interested in hanging out with you. Jesus lovers love the people Jesus loves, and we are growing in this love more and more.

And so if you love Jesus' bride even though she is broken. If you are giving yourself more and more to living out the "one another's" of the New Testament – bear with one another, submit to one another, encourage one another – and you are doing this out of a love for Jesus, it's because Jesus' Spirit is at work in you and you can know that you know Him. That's the second test.

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Finally third, John provides a truth test – this world is built on an objective truth we must affirm. So it doesn't matter if you don't believe in winter. If you drive like it's still summer truth will get you. And similarly there is a moral and spiritual truth in the universe. And you can deny truth if you want to, but denial will cost you here on earth and for eternity.

And the truth John says is essential for people to accept is found in verse 22. John says:

And who is a liar? Anyone who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Anyone who denies the Father and the Son is an antichrist. Anyone who denies the Son doesn't have the Father, either. But anyone who acknowledges the Son has the Father also. (1 John 2:22-23)

And this is the truth test. If you acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ – He's the Saviour; He's God with skin on come into the world to save sinners – if you believe this then you can know that you know Jesus. And if you don't believe this then you are not a Christian and you are not saved. This is what theologians call essential theology.

Now we dug into this two weeks ago, but one more word today because theology is important – it shapes how we think about God. But all theology is not equally important. Some of it is essential for salvation and some of it isn't.

I gave a couple examples of this last time, but I'll give you one more today. Baptism is an example of non-essential theology. It's important. It's the physical symbol that pictures the spiritual act of committing your life to follow Christ. And it's something Jesus commands His followers to do. He says:

Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19)

So baptism is incredibly important. If you are considering whether you should be baptized it doesn't make sense to say, "I'm a Jesus follower, but I'm just not interested in following what Jesus says." If you love Jesus, you should be baptized.

But theologians would not call baptism an essential theology because baptism is not essential for salvation, here's why: Jesus says we should baptize disciples, He doesn't say people become disciples when they are baptized. Do you see the difference? Baptism and being a disciple of Jesus aren't the same thing.

And so Jesus can say to the thief on the cross "Today you will be with Me in paradise" even though he didn't get baptized. So this means there will be people in heaven who had different beliefs about when and how people should be baptized. There will be people in heaven who were sprinkled instead of dunked – I know it's scandalous to imagine – there will even be people in heaven who were baptized as babies.

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Now as "Baptists" we've dug long and hard into this one, and we can tell you that the Greek word "*baptizo*" refers to being plunged or submerged in water. It does not mean sprinkled. And while we know there are references to families being baptized in the Bible, children are never specifically mentioned. What is specifically mentioned is that it's disciples who get baptized not the children of disciples. So we are pretty sure we are right.

But guess what, while this is important, it's more important that we love our brothers and sisters in Christ who believe different things about this than that we beat them over the head with what we know to be true. You see baptism is important, but you don't get saved by what you believe about baptism.

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Just one more thought here: while you can be passionate about different matters of non-essential theology, it's a massive problem if you are more passionate about these doctrines than you are about the gospel. You see what's exciting about God's truth is that God put on skin and came to earth in order to defeat evil and death and bring us back into the relationship with Him we were created for in the beginning. It's that truth that makes people like us into brothers and sisters and children of God. And that's what we should be excited about.

I mean it's not an accident that in all the "one anothers" of scripture the Bible never says "Convince one another that you are right." Or "hold one another in contempt if a brother's theology doesn't measure up to yours." Instead we are told, "honour one another" and "live in harmony with one another" even when we disagree. All doctrine is important, but it's not all worth dying for.

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But some doctrine is worthy dying for. And this is the truth test John gives us. John says anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ is a liar. And a couple chapters later he fills this out a little adding:

If a person... acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God.... All who declare that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. (1 John 4:2;15)

This is what's at the core. And guess what, it's all about Jesus putting on skin to become the Saviour of the world.

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So here is essential theology: It's that I'm a sinner and there is no way for me to rectify this on my own. No amount of hard work can ever make it possible for me to climb to God. My only hope is that God would bridge the gap between us on my behalf. And so God did. God valued relationship with me so much that God put on skin to walk in my shoes and take my sin upon Himself. And at the cross Jesus overcame the power of sin and death rescuing me from its grip and clothing me in His righteousness so that I could come back to the relationship with God I was created for in the beginning.

John says what we believe about who Jesus was and what He accomplished on our behalf is essential.

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But it's not simply that it's essential, John also says it is self-evident. And this is what he's getting at with his seemingly strange wording in verse 22. John says:

And who is a liar? Anyone who says that Jesus is not the Christ. (1 John 2:22)

So John doesn't say people who don't believe in Jesus are confused or lack information. John says people who do not say Jesus is the Christ are liars. But a liar is someone who knows the truth and says something else.

In the news this week Elizabeth Holmes, the world's youngest self-made, female billionaire – the CEO of the Theranos medical company – was sentenced to 11 years in prison for fraud.

Holmes claimed to have invented a technology able to diagnose all sorts of medical conditions through a simple blood test. And investors bought in to the tune of a billion dollars. The only problem was Elizabeth knew her tests didn't work. She lied. And now she's going to jail. Lying means knowingly distorting the truth.

But it's rare that we meet someone who says "I know Jesus is God and this is going to bite me in the end, but I just get a kick out of telling people it's not true." I don't know that guy, but John says that's what's happening. What's going on here?

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Well, what John says here is actually something that gets said all over the New Testament, and that is that to not believe in Jesus is not simply a lack of faith or information, it is actually unbelief or faithlessness which is the refusal to believe.

So in Mark 6 Jesus has been healing the sick and raising the dead and then He comes home to Nazareth where people knew Him as a boy. And Mark tells us His neighbours scoffed at Him:

"He's just a carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. And His sisters live right here among us." They were deeply offended and refused to believe in Him. (Mark 6:3)

Mark's picturing something that happens so often. It's not that people don't believe, it's that they don't want to believe. Or, it's like Paul says in Romans 1:

God shows His anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth.... They know the truth about God because He has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see His invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God. (Romans 1:18-20)

It's not a lack of believe that's the problem, it's an unbelieving suppression of the truth that's the problem. This is the lie John speaks of. And in verse 27 he unpacks this by giving us the other side of the coin. Speaking to believers he says:

As for you, the anointing you received from [Jesus] remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as His anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in Him. (1 John 2:27)

John says we don't need to be taught about truth because Jesus' anointing opens our eyes to see that what is self-evident – Jesus enables us to see what is obviously true.

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But hold on you say, is the story of God becoming a person really self-evident? Is it the same as saying water runs downhill? Is it really so obvious that to deny it is a lie?

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Well certainly this isn't a popular perspective, but Tim Keller put me onto a guy you've probably heard of, who defended this perspective quite articulately. And the guy's name was J.R.R. Tolkien – the author of The Lord of the Rings.¹

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So Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were friends. And Tolkien won Lewis to Christ. They were walking together one day on Adison Avenue when Lewis, who was a doctor of ancient literature and an atheist said, “when you read the old myths it almost makes you feel like there is truth and right and wrong. But myths are lies breathed through silver.”

Lewis meant that while we love the great stories, the only problem with them is that we all know they aren't true – they are lies.

But Tolkien responded, “No, they are not.” And he went on to explain how the reason we love great stories is because they point us to the greatest story that we all intrinsically know to be true. And Lewis became a Christian on that walk.

Later, Tolkien wrote an essay titled “On Fairy-Stories” where he unpacks the meat of his talk with Lewis and argues that the purpose of fiction is actually to draw us into truth. And it is this truth that resonates with us.

So there never were any historical figures named Romeo or Juliette. But the point of their story is true. Love is an overpowering force that supersedes all other values.

¹ The following section adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-truth-the-lie-5800/> (Accessed November 19, 2022)

Or think “Beauty and the Beast.” Beauty kisses the beast, and his ugliness falls away. It’s a fairytale. We all know that it’s not true. But at the same time there is something about it that rings profoundly true. Ugly and broken people can be changed into what we were supposed to be when beauty condescends to our level.

Or how about Harry Potter? It’s a story about wizards and magic. But below the magic Harry learns in school, lies a deep magic. It is sacrificial love that overpowers evil and defeats death. One person lays down his life for his friends.

Or how about the Lord of the Rings? Tolkien himself summed up the meaning behind his Orcs and dwarves and hobbits and one ring to rule them all with the simple idea that every human has a longing to defeat death and live forever and God put this in us.

And Tolkien says it is these self-evident truths that lie within fiction that we resonate with. Intrinsically we know that as dark as it gets good will overcome in the end. We long for eternal life. All humanity craves the forgiveness of our own failings and healing for our brokenness. We long for the truths God set at the very core of His world. And the great stories capture these ideas and present them to us with a candy coating.

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So kids hate medicine. It tastes gross. But if your kid is going to puke in the backseat they need some Gravol. So pharmaceutical companies have flavored medicine in ways that trick kids’ brains into thinking it’s candy. But their bodies aren’t tricked, and they get what they need. And it’s the same story. Great story tricks our brains into thinking it’s candy, but our souls know it is the truth we need.

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Here’s the point: this is God’s world. That means while you can write off the whole idea of God and miracles and heaven and hell, the reality of these things lies at the foundation of the world we walk on. It’s the deep magic below the hustle and bustle of going to work and paying the bills. God’s reality is simply more real than the real things we touch and see, and our souls are born hungering for what is really real.

And this shouldn’t surprise us. Like did you ever notice that all children love stories? It’s older people who tend to grow discontent with imagination – right? But is that because we have a better grip on reality than we used to, or a worse one?

Like have the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth helped us get a clearer view of what is real? Or could it be that it’s the childlike imagination we were born with that goes hand in hand with the childlike faith Jesus loves?

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Tolkien would add, the reason we love great story is not because it whisks us away from reality, but because it grounds us in the real reality we were born to long for.

So the Lion King, what’s it about? It’s about how when the true king is in charge everything in life is in harmony. How about Sleeping Beauty? It’s about how death is not the end.

Or how about Peter Pan? It's about never growing old. It's about pixie dust and a golden age where dreams really do come true. Well of course we don't believe in that. We don't believe in eternity. We don't believe in flying. We don't believe there will ever be a time like that. Your mind might tell you that, but your soul knows it's a lie.

You see, while all these stories aren't historically true, they are all grounded in the foundational truth our world is built on. These stories point to moral order and absolutes. They point to heaven and hell and the supernatural. And we love them like kids love strawberry Grapol. They feel like candy, but our soul knows they are true. Our soul knows we live in a world bewitched by sin. Our soul knows there is an evil sorcerer and a supernatural realm. And our soul knows there is a Prince who can kiss us and wake us up into abundant life.

And this is the beauty of the gospel. You see the gospel is not simply one more great story pointing our hearts towards truth. The gospel says that the Way, the Truth and the Life put on skin and entered history. Jesus is the Knight we've waited for who will slay the dragon. He's the Prince who will marry the peasant girl; the King who will lay His life down for His subjects. Jesus is the awesome reality that all the other stories point to. So when John says the one who denies Jesus is the Christ is a liar, he means they are denying the self-evident reality God built into the fabric of the world.

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The other day I was having breakfast with my kids and we were dreaming about having superpowers. And one kid wanted to fly, and another dreamed of being able to jump off a cliff and not get hurt. They were dreaming of immortality and eternal life. They are dreaming of a reality beyond the one we can see and touch.

And the beauty of the Christian message is that the dreamworld they long for is true. In fact it's more real than the broken world of sin and death we live in; it will outlast it in the end. So John calls you, live your life in tune with God's reality so you can enjoy what He created you for.

Friends, don't lie to yourself. What you can see and touch isn't all there is. Jesus is the Son of God. And He put on skin and came to earth to rescue every street rat and popper. He came to set free every slave and restore every broken body. And if you will declare in word and deed that Jesus is the Christ then you too can be brought into the abundant life that every soul has been longed for since the beginning of creation. Friends, the stories are true.