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Title: Virtue or Vice: Skepticism

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 13

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Hi everybody. How are you doing? It's good to see you and good to be here. We're in the last week of the series Virtue or Vice. Today we're talking a little bit about skepticism, whether it's a good thing or not. I'm going to go out on a limb right here and say I think skepticism is a good thing. I think it's a pretty good thing. Here's one of the reasons why. You have to watch the information that people try to give you to be a little skeptical because there are a lot of wackos out there.

I used to gather a collection of stuff from these little magazines that you could buy at different places like the Weekly World News. I don't even know where they are anymore, but when I would go to places that I remember, this is one place up towards here, I used to get a bunch of them. I brought some of the old ones with me to share with you, just to show you how it might not be a bad idea to be skeptical.

Here's one right here called "A Woman Gives Birth to a Black Sheep." I'm a little skeptical about that. Maybe that really didn't happen. Here's another one, "Hungry Elephant Kills Clown Dressed like Giant Peanut." I guess that could happen. I know I'm skeptical but here's this one, and it's a kind of a religious one. This guy had a near-death experience. He says, I went to heaven, met Elvis Presley, and took a picture of him. And sure enough, there is a picture of Elvis through the clouds around him in heaven and so forth. Apparently, he not only had the out-of-body experience, he also had the camera out-of-case experience at the same time. Here's one that actually took place here in Pennsylvania for a change. It says, "Pennsylvania Doctor Keeps Wife's Severed Head Alive for Seven Years." There's a picture of her severed head. As I look at her, I wonder why he kept her alive. Oh, no, no, no. I'm sorry. I didn't mean this.

This is a good one too, "Satan Captured." This took place in Spain. A couple of guys captured Satan and had him in a tin hut somewhere. And this is the amazing thing. They didn't know what to do with them, so they let him out. Jerks. And this one was pretty obvious too. I'm a little skeptical about this one, "My Toilet is Possessed by the Devil." Apparently, that had to do with strange noises, smells, and odors. No, no, no, no. This is one of the most incredible ones that I ever saw, "Man Attacked by Killer Newspaper." It's probably a good idea to be skeptical about some things.

You have to ask yourself though about serious stuff that might actually impact your life, about your own Christian life. Is it a good idea to be skeptical? Well, we'll look and see. We're looking at the passage that's at the end of Second Corinthians in chapter 13. Here's what says. By the way, you probably need to have just a wee bit of context about Corinth, the city, of course, where Paul wrote this letter. He'd been there for a long time. He spent a lot more time in this church in Greece than any other church that he was at, and he wrote a couple of letters.

They centered around issues that were problems. One of the problems was that Corinth was like Las Vegas. It was like a place that was money-oriented, you had to be sort of hip to be

there, and it had a kind of class system that was involved with it. And Paul didn't fit in any of this. It was multi-religious and so forth. They had strange religious practices by strange religions that through their 40-some temples in the city had all kinds of strange things going on, and prostitution was part of the ritual. And he had to speak about these things. It was a complex and confused society. I think you know what I'm talking about.

So, anyway, the idea was that he got challenged as to whether he knew what he was talking about and if he actually was sent from God as an apostle. One of the reasons was because he was poor. Okay? This was a place where wealth was taken to be a sign that it was sort of the health-wealth gospel there. By the way, he wrote these letters to Christians, where people at least claimed to be Christians. One of the issues they had with him was he seemed to be a poor guy, and they were wealthy. They assumed that God would bless you if you were wealthy. He didn't have a prestigious job like many of them, and this was a big-time place. He had a job where he sewed tents back together that had been ripped in an alley someplace. And they said he's barely making it back there. He's a poor guy.

Not only that, but this was also a sophisticated place. They had these guys who were like professional rhetoricians we might call them. In other words, they were guys who were good at speaking, and they were persuasive and fascinating. They were interesting to listen to, and people were captivated by them. They had great technique in crowds too. They had an amphitheater that people would go to. Sometimes 3,000 people would go to hear somebody speak and give a talk on who knows what.

Meanwhile, they said Paul's supposed to be like an ambassador from God, and he is poor and doesn't seem to be blessed by God. He's not the greatest speaker in that way, you know. And then if that wasn't bad enough, there was a bunch of people just following him around from town to town wherever Paul went and they were called Judaizers. These were guys who basically said he hasn't got the whole Christian thing down right. What you have to do if you're going to be a Christian is you have to not only believe these things about Jesus or what he did and so forth, but the important part is it's the fulfillment of Judaism. And so, you got to be a Jew first to be a Christian.

As a result, you had to follow all the Old Testament laws and all the Jewish traditions. You had to make sure that you got circumcised. You had to make sure you followed the food things, that you went to all the religious holidays, and did all the rituals that went along with it. And so, Paul, he didn't seem like he fit in with these people, and these were all oppositions they took with him.

So, when he writes the letters, he's writing them to talk about this. This is the end of the second letter. He's getting ready for his last trip to go back to them. Here's what it says. "This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." That's like a Jewish law thing that you had to have two or three witnesses. I think he was saying I'm coming for the third time. I know these guys are going to say something about the law and two or three witnesses. This is my third time with three witnesses. And he was making fun of them a little bit.

Then he says this. "I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the

others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in our dealing with you."

So, you see some of the things that he was trying to address were weaknesses and some Jewish things. But then he gets to the heart of it, and here's the warning. "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong—not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is that you may be fully restored. This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down. Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All God's people here send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

I thought we'd start with that part in here where it says, greet each other with a holy kiss. Do you know what he's trying to say? He's trying to say, you don't show that kind of intimacy and interest in somebody unless you're part of them. They're with you. You know them. His assumption is I want you to be unified in the way that you see things. I want you to be unified about the authority that I have in that I am speaking for God. I want to be unified in the things that when I say something to you, it's going to be good for you, and it's going to build you up. All I want is for you to be perfect. Now, I don't think he means perfect in the sense that you never do anything wrong ever again. I don't think that's what the point is. I think the word perfect here means more of I want you to be mature. I want you to move in that kind of direction.

When I think about whether I have made it in that direction, one of the things that first comes to my mind is when I was a kid, when I was in high school, and such. I'd do something really stupid things. I'd come home, see my dad, and he would look at me and say, thoughtless. That's immature, isn't it? Thoughtless. You didn't think it through. You didn't try to be consistent with what you said you were going to do, what you thought it was going to be about, or what was important or something like that.

Here's what Paul said. I want you to be mature. I want you to grow. In the Philippians passage, he writes to another church that he was on much better terms with. He says I'm pushing on to perfection. I haven't accomplished it yet. I still mess up. And, by the way, we all do. I don't think the expectation of God for us or anybody here sitting in this room is that if you're a Christian, somehow, you're going to be perfect to pass the test.

When you examine yourself, when you take the test, are you in the faith? Is Jesus in you? You don't have to be perfect. It's not about that. That's not the context of it. It's about whether you are moving in that direction. Have you started at the right place? Because you know what it's

really all about is when God says I'm going to forgive you and make you my child on the basis of unmerited love that comes from me. You don't have to do anything. I'm going to do it for you. That's the heart of the gospel of the Christian faith. That is about what Jesus has done in his life and death and resurrection, that God says, I'm doing this for you. I'm giving you this freely. You don't have to earn it or deserve it. If you don't have to earn it or if you mess up, it's not about that.

God's going to love you as much today if you act right and you do good things as the day when you mess it up regularly, moment by moment. But what I want you to do is I want you to move towards that. And Paul says, that's what I'm doing. In that Philippians passage, he uses a little sports metaphor. He says I'm pressing on like I'm in a race. I'm running towards that goal. I'm reaching out towards it to get there. I haven't got there yet, but I want to get that crown. I want to get that connection. I want to get that intimacy with God that allows me to be able to know what it's like to be the kind of person that he wants me to be. And so, I'm going to push forward to that. I'm going to push forward.

So, here's what he says. Listen, this is in that same passage. He says I'm going to take hold of the one who's taken hold of me. That's a great metaphor right there because that's the Christian life. The Christian life isn't about you taking hold of God. It's not about that. It's not about you working so hard to be such a good person that you pat yourself on the back every time you do. No. It has nothing to do with that. It's us taking hold of the one who's taking hold of us.

I tell this story all the time. My daughter was a little girl, and we would take her sled and go sledding on this hill, and it was right down from our house. It was a big hill. The kids in the neighborhood would put a big hunk of snow in the middle of the hill so that we'd catch a little air. And so, I'd get on the sled, get her on my lap, and say to her, hold on honey. And then I'd hold on to her. Here's the deal. We went over that thing. It wasn't her holding on to me that got us over that bump and didn't get her killed, it was me holding on to her. And so, what I do is I press on towards the goal. I don't have to be perfect. It's not about what I do. It's about what God does for me. And so, this is what Paul's pointing at. He's pointing at moving forward. Moving forward to perfection in a way.

Well, the point is this. Clearly, this church was not perfect. There is no question whatsoever they were not perfect. But how were they doing? Well, pretty bad. You know, a lot of things they didn't do right. And so, Paul's saying to them, I'll tell you what, so I don't have to be harsh when I get there, I've written you always these things previously. We've talked about these things. We spent so much time together. Why don't you learn to examine yourself? That's the heart of this. That's what's at the core of these two commandments. Examine yourself, test yourself, to see whether you're in Jesus, and to see whether your faith is real. This is kind of a heavy thing because you know what I'm asking you to do, and I'm asking myself to do that, is to test myself, examine myself, look at myself, and see whether or not I'm in Jesus. Because that's what it's about.

By the way, this isn't a question about do you have certain intellectual doubts. You wonder about the veracity of the Bible and its historicity and whether it is accurate. That's apologetic information. You can read books about that. You get some certainty about that and more or less certain about those kinds of things. It's not that kind of doubt that we're talking about. li's

the doubt as to whether or not you're actually in God, whether or not he has taken hold of you, whether it's real, or whether your faith is real or not. And so, Paul is saying here, I want you to examine yourself.

So, what are you going to do to examine yourself? Well, I got four things. Okay, are you ready? Here's the first one. I think the first thing is you ask this question; do you love God? Do you love God? You ask yourself that question, do you love God? I mean, that seems like a reasonable thing to ask, doesn't it? Do you know what Jesus says? He says, if you love me, you'll keep my commandments. Do you know how we know whether we love him? It's whether we show that we love him, by the way we live by following his commandments.

Hey, is anybody here dating at the moment? Put your hand up if you're dating. Wow. Especially those guys over there. Seriously, you have to get out more. Okay, so you know when you finally find somebody and you love them or you think you love them? What do you do? You try to find out what they love. Don't you? If you love them and you want to show them that you love them, you'd say what do they love? I'll give them what they love.

Have you ever read one of those love language books? *The Five Love Languages*. You know, it's about all these different ways you find out what the unique way of loving a person is. You want to know whether you love God or not? Do you try to find out what he likes, what he's into, and what he's about. By the way, he's not hiding it. He's revealed it to us. He's giving his word to be able to say this is what I'm about. This is what I've done. The more you find out about it, the more opportunity you have to say, well, let me respond to that by showing you that I love you. I see these are the things that you love. I'm going to love those things. And in doing that, I'll be demonstrating my love towards you, my thankfulness towards you.

It seems like that's an easy question in self-examination. Do I love God and is there any proof of it? Can I prove it in some way? Can I open up my checkbook, look at where I've spent my money, and say clearly that I love God? Do I look at my appointment book? Do I look at where I spend my time, the things that seem to consume me or take up all the hours? And I ask myself do I love God? Do I see the things I give to my family, or to the people that I say that I love, the way that I take care of my neighbors, the way that I respond to the people, that as I see them seem most in need? Do I love them? We should be able to know.

So, do you love God? That's the first one. The second one is, do you have the ability and willingness to hear the truth? And again, this goes back to the necessity for Christians to be involved in reading the Bible. I don't know how much you're involved in reading the Bible or not, but unless you missed it, we gave a couple of announcements about things that could help you get more connected with reading the Bible. There's a lot of different ways you can grow and read the Bible. You can make a plan yourself to read through the Bible. I teach a class called *How to Read the Bible*. I get a lot of good Christian college students that come to it. They want to know how to read the Bible. I ask them, how many of you read the Bible personally on a regular basis or have a plan for reading? Very, very few of them.

By the way, if God were to send you a letter today, you got home and the letter's in the mailbox, and you take it out and say oh, my gosh, God's letter is four pages long, this is probably what you would do. You go to page two, you'd read three sentences in the first

paragraph, and then you'd fold it up and put it back in the envelope. Then you'd put it on your desk. Nobody would ever read a letter from God like that.

They did a Barna survey with people who said they were Christians and who believed in God. They asked if they believed the Bible was a revelation from God. Over 50% of them said yes, maybe some others had some questions about it and they hadn't done their apologetic homework. And so, they had some doubts. More than 50% said they think the Bible is a revelation from God. Then they asked that 50% what percentage of you actually read the Bible on a regular basis. Ten. I mean, I'm not quite sure if we examine ourselves and ask ourselves, am I interested and willing to know the truth, and it's revealed to me, and then I don't take advantage of it? I don't look to it. Maybe it's because it seems weird to you or you can't figure it out. Maybe you need to get with some people who know it. Don't read the Bible just by yourself. Get together with some other believers, some people that know a little bit more of it so you can share stuff with them. You can talk about it.

I see my friend Bill over here. He used to live up at Ligonier a long time ago, and when I was in college, I think you were living here, and R.C. Sproul had a place up there. He was a Theologian. We used to drive sometimes from Grove City to Ligonier to hear this guy teach us about the Bible. Because we wanted to know the truth. On the way back from one of those, as we're discussing the things that we talked about, do you think we ever asked ourselves, do we really love God? Do you think He's part of our life? No, they would have to examine themselves at that point, we could see it. It was obvious to us. But maybe that's what we need to do, though. We need to get into a small group. We need to expand our ability to be able to hear the truth. Because that's the way we're going to learn how to be able to respond, how to test it, and how to put it to work in our lives.

But I think there's a difference between examining yourself and testing yourself. I know that examine and test seem like the same word. I think there are two different things going on here. I think the one thing when you examine yourself is when you ask these kinds of questions internally and you wonder about what am I doing there? You have certain things. I think testing yourself is when you say well, let me see whether I actually do anything about it. I can say, oh, yes, I examined myself. I love God. I believe he revealed himself to us. And the question is, where's the proof of the pudding? Test yourself, you know, try some things. Do something to demonstrate to yourself that you actually believe the thing you say. Do you know what faith is? Faith is a certain content. It's the ascent that that content is true, and then it's the trusting of that content. Paul, I think is saying that you're not in Jesus if you just have a content and you think it's true. It's not enough. You have got to trust it. It has to be part of examining yourself to see whether or not you've trusted it or whether you know it.

So, you want to love Go and you want to be willing to hear about it. Here's the third thing. The third thing is this. Do you see God's spirit active in your life? This is so subjective. You know, do you see the spirit of God active in your life? Well, I'll tell you one of the ways you can see the spirit of God active in your life. When you examine yourself and you feel guilty, or you do something and you know you shouldn't have done it and you feel guilty, the spirit of God is probably proactive in your life. That's one of the things the spirit of God is about. The spirit of God comes in to be that work of God inside you, to transform you into the kind of person, into the very image of God himself.

I was working up at Lake Chautauqua one summer, and we had a kind of college ministry up there. It was one or two nights a week. We'd go up to this little place where there was a fountain park, and some guys would bring their guitars and sing. It was like a hippie kind of thing. We were all up there sitting around talking and such, and finally, somebody would ask a question and we'd have a little discussion about the Bible. And people who were just there for the summer or the week or whatever would be wandering by and hearing the music, they'd sit down, listen, and connect with the conversation.

I remember one summer there were these folks from the New York Ballet who had come, right? And a couple of them came down, you know, one of the nights we were there, and we're talking about Jesus, about the power of the love of God in him being crucified for our sin, and the verification that it was accepted as a punishment for our sin by his resurrection from the dead. So, this one woman came over to me. She said, I just want to make sure I heard this right. She said, are you claiming that after Jesus died on the cross he actually was resurrected and came back to life? And I thought to myself, what country do you live in, lady? You know what I mean? Yeah, that's what we claim. She said I hadn't thought of that, why that was important. She said I need to look into that a little bit more.

So, she came down to the place where we gave her a book. She looked at it a little bit of some of the apologetic information about the resurrection and so forth. Then she came down another time and just sort of sat there. But the third time she came down, she said, I've decided, I realized God loves me and I need to respond to him because of the life I've lived. And I said, fantastic. She said, so I'm going to become a Christian. What do I do? I said, well, you just pray and ask God to come into your life. She says I don't know how to pray. I said, I'll pray and then you just repeat it after me. She said okay. So, we prayed and one of the things that I prayed was I said, God, come into my life and make me into the kind of person that you want me to be. And afterward, she said the same thing. In the end, she was so happy, and she was crying. She said I have this relationship with God, the creator of the universe, and he loves me in spite of the way that I've lived my life. He loves me so much that he's died for me. She was overwhelmed by it.

Every time I saw her for the next couple of times, she was really excited about everything. And then I saw when she was kind of down and I said, hey, what's up? What's happening? She said well, I'm not really sure I meant it the other night when I prayed. I said why not? She said, well, before I did that, there were some things that I did I was involved with and I wasn't proud of it, but I did it the other night. I kind of went back to that way of living. I said let me ask you this. You've done these things before? She said yes. I said did you ever feel this bad after you did them before? No, I never felt bad like this before. I say that's great! You asked God to make you into the kind of person He wants you to be. He got on the job within a week, pointing out things that he thought ought to be different in your life, how you want to change your life, and you're sad about it. She was like, you're right! Isn't that the way the spirit works in mysterious kind of ways?

Paul in another one of his letters in the book of Romans chapter eight, talks about the work of the Holy Spirit. One of the things he says is the Spirit is alive, trying to make us alive, turn us into new people, restore us, and move us toward perfection. That's kind of what his point is. He said the spirit changes you from the inside out. And he says sometimes when you go to pray, you don't even know what to pray. You're so immature in your faith that you don't even

know what to pray. And the Spirit intercedes for you with groans, too deep for words, praying to God what God wants to see happen in your life. You don't even have to figure out how to pray right. God will figure out how to pray for you because he decides what you want to hear, and then he has the Holy Spirit pray for you throughout your life. That's wacky. That's mysterious kind of stuff. But you know what the good news is? The good news is that God is not going to let you atrophy in that sense. And you know, it maybe it's by driving you to that point where you despair.

Here's one of maybe the fourth things I think happens is that we start to develop dissatisfaction with the way that our life has been, you know, the old status quo. You know, we look at it, we think to ourselves, this isn't great. This is flat. And we do things because we've found out from His Word that these are in opposition to what he's really about. Then we say to ourselves, oh no, you know what I've done? I've spit in the face of God who loves me and died for me. By doing that, I, you, start to grieve over your own sin.

One of the reasons why people don't want to self-examine is because when they begin to, they think of the things that they've done wrong, and they don't want to dwell on them because they don't want to feel bad about themselves. One thing the Bible tells us elsewhere is that Satan is an accuser of the brothers and sisters in the faith before God. Satan goes to God and he says, oh yeah, like he did with Job, he only says he believes in you because you're being nice to him. If he got messed up, he wouldn't trust you. By the way, Satan doesn't just accuse you before God, he accuses you before you. He has a way of being able to speak to you. Just be able to say, yeah, you're messed up. Look what you did. These people hate you. He works with other people to point it out in us too. If we don't want to examine ourselves, guess what? Other people will be glad to point out to us the things that we're not so great at.

But Satan's only one being. He's got a full schedule, but he doesn't get all that time to give to you. It's a big world and a lot of people. So, you know what he normally does? If he comes to you and makes you doubt whether your faith is real because he accuses you of some sin and you're starting to feel it, and that's why you're avoiding examining yourself, it's his tell. He doesn't come and try to accuse you of things that you're good at, things you're doing well at, he comes to accuse you of things you are failing at. And so, if that begins to happen, if you begin to feel that accusation, that's the tell that he sees you.

You know what a tell is? A tell is when you know this is a big deal but pretend that it's not happening, but it really is happening. If you self-examine and you find yourself accusing yourself and saying this is worthless, this is impossible, I'm never going to move towards maturity. Maybe I'm not in God. Maybe Jesus isn't in me. That's good news. It's pointing out the thing that's weak. And you know what? It's because you have a weak faith. You know what you got to do? Get some heavier, stronger faith. That should be what you say. You know what I got to do to do it? I've got to go back to the love of God thing. I have to remember what he's about, how he loves me, how he's forgiving me, it's not about what I do, it's about what he's done, I got to get into His Word, I got to find out what the truth is about these things, how it happens, how it works, I got to work it out in my life, and I got to start living it out.

Here's my last thing. I think the last thing is you have to seek out and enjoy being with the people of God because this is not something you can do by yourself. You have got to figure out how to get with other people. Nobody told me to say this, but I'm going to go out on a limb here and say everybody who's a member of this church ought to be involved in some kind of small group. We need that. I need that. I need to be with people who are going to be able to speak to me. That's the way the Holy Spirit works. The Holy Spirit works through the church. He works through me to somebody else. If you examine yourself and find that you have questions, get with somebody who's a little stronger than you are. You might have to build a little trust with that one person or a couple of people, but get somebody to be there. Get somebody a little more mature who understands the Bible and can help you get on that path moving back to loving God.

Here's the last thing. If you examine yourself and you want to know whether you're in God, here's the way you know. Your life changes and it continues to change. Nobody reaches perfection. We all screw up. We go back to the beginning every time we do. What is the beginning? Well, Paul ends with it. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. That's the end of this letter. You go back to the beginning, and you remind yourself this whole thing is about God coming to me. His grace. It is what He has done. It's the Father showing his love towards me in the life and death of Jesus and the words of Jesus. And then here's what happens. The Holy Spirit comes to mediate that in our life, to make us become the kind of person we want to be. So, what I'm going to do is I'm going to say, God, I love you for what you've done. We've got work to do. I want to press on to perfection and make it happen. God, change my life.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for this day and for this Word of encouragement. We thank you for the things that you've done in life and the death and resurrection of Jesus. We thank you for the love that you demonstrated in that for us, that you graciously and without requirement of our response at first to that, that you love us and continue to love us. And we thank you for the gift of the spirit that works within us by you to turn us into the people we want to be. I pray for all of us, Lord, that we would examine our lives and we would find ourselves in Jesus and want to go deeper. We pray this in Jesus' name for His kingdom. Amen.