

A Discerning Love

“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God...” 1 John 4:1. Friends, we are living in the days of spiritual confusion. You may have heard the German phrase “zeit geist” which means ***“spirit of the times.”*** The spirit of our times finds it difficult to know right from wrong, and you may be castigated as offensive for saying one way is wrong and another right. So easily do we get swept along by the spirit of the times, largely because it is easier to go along with what seems popular or at least loudest, when it comes to cultural mores. Cultural mores oh yes ... values, morals, and morality, what is considered to be, or known to be, right and wrong. How can we know who is telling the truth? How can we know what is truly right and what is wrong? And if something feels good or right to some people, who are we to say it is wrong?

To add to the confusion in our times are the many people who believe we can hold contending or mutually exclusive “truths” together, at the same time, and somehow find community and peace in such a contradictory state. We find that one teaches that certain behaviors are sins for which Christ died, while another may well teach that such behaviors are not sin, but signs of wholeness. What some see as sin, others consider a sacrament. This is the post-modern view of truth and morality.

Many in our society, and our churches as well, now view the Bible as a document with no objective vision of truth, or standard of morality. This invites persons to construct their own edifice of meaning and “private interpretation,” based on their personal narratives rather than the narrative of Scripture. And it’s more than disagreeing about the interpretation of the Bible, it’s a view that says there is no real, objective truth in the Bible, and therefore it cannot be authoritative. The end point of this post-modern view is to completely abandon any belief that objective truth can even be known. No wonder we have spiritual and moral confusion all around us!

Contrast this with the witness of John. He warns that the world is full of false prophets, and if they are not from Jesus, they are from the antichrist. The world welcomes false prophets because they appeal to our fallen desires. The Holy Spirit enables us to recognize and resist false prophets - ***“... the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”*** And those that receive and follow the teaching of the apostles will know God and the truth.

A Discerning Spirit

The litmus test of Christianity is the person of Jesus Christ. *“Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God...”* Love originates with God: *“love is from God,”* and lack of love demonstrates that we lack an intimate knowledge of the God of love. A genuine brotherly love demonstrates that we know the God of love. The love John is talking about is known and manifested in the Son: *“God sent his only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him,”* (vs. 9-10). He is the source of life. He is the source of forgiveness. He is the embodiment of God’s love and truth.

In his letters to Christians, the apostle John shares and clarifies the truth he knows from having been with the living Truth; having walked and talked and eaten with Jesus Christ. And because of his first-hand experience of Jesus, John can rightly tell us how we can know truth from falsehood, right from wrong.

How do I discern that someone has a right relationship with God? They have a right view of Jesus Christ—Truth; and they have a right view of their brothers and sisters in Christ – Love. Truth and love always go together in the Christian life.

A Discerning Love

Let’s talk about this notion of love. That’s a word so often used in our culture that is freighted with many meanings, but perhaps not including its biblical meaning. John writes, *“Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”*

People want to fill that phrase with their own ideas of what love means, likely not realizing how human love and God’s love differ. We live in a time when empty, sloppy, “love is love” rhetoric may sound like wisdom, but it’s the wisdom of this world. Sadly, many Christians buy into the same empty theme, without discernment or reference to a Biblical understanding of love.

St. Paul makes this very point, *“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ,”* Philippians 1:9-10.

Human love is often emotionally volatile and very often self-serving. That is because human love champions *eros* – a sexualized version of love. Biblical love is deeper because it is based on the truth of who God is, and it therefore discerns between truth and error, and it manifests itself in compassion toward others. Let’s be clear: our culture has bought into a couple of notions that are not true. The first is that if you disagree with someone’s lifestyle, you must fear or hate them. The second is that to love someone means you agree with everything they believe or do. Both are

nonsense. You don't have to compromise convictions to be compassionate. Jesus demonstrated that!

God's love is a self-sacrificing, agape love. As Paul tells us in Philippians (1:9-10), Biblical love is grounded in real knowledge and all discernment. In order to actually be of value, love must be rooted in truth. Authentic love wants what is best for another person, not necessarily what they want or desire or feel they need. Love aligns with God's revealed desire for His creation. Love is gentle and patient, but it never veers from truth.

Love for the Lost

God so loved the world that he didn't let humanity continue to spin out it's own destruction, wrapped as it is in sin. Too few of us preachers speak of the wrath of God against sin. But Jesus did. He is dead set against sin and sinning because He loves people and sin destroys people.

John warns the early Christians, and us, about yearning for a god who simply gives out romance and erotic love and neighborly generosity with no strings attached. Today we might call this unconditional love. Surely this is grace for all. Yes it is. But it is not truth.

Jesus said there were conditions attached. *"Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'"* Mark 1:14-15. Jesus invites us into the Kingdom of Heaven, not a non-existent political utopia. The entry door is repentance from sin. You have to realize and admit that the way you're living or what you're doing is sin, before you can realize the love that is offered - a love that can transform us.

Jesus spoke of the surrender of the ego, the plucking out of eyes that offended, the cutting off of hands that grasped in the wrong direction; God's grace is conditional on repentance. At the crossroads, Jesus commands us to turn back, in order to find the narrow path that is God's way into the kingdom that we missed because it was too narrow, or we avoided because it was too steep. But it is the road to true life. *"We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them,"* Ephesians 2:10.

Why do those who refuse to go along with the "zeitgeist" find themselves called names and criticized for their understanding of morality and identity? Because what Jesus taught isn't all that popular. Only a few will hear and consent to be transformed. Only a few will follow and find the pearl of great price. The others will demand utopia on their own terms, and will tragically fall into a dystopia of distress, a world where their longings increase in addictive appetite, becoming longings that are never and can never be satisfied.

Confidence in Mature Love

John reminds Christians that God showed true love through Jesus, and as we are perfected in His love we will have confidence on the day of judgment, for we will have lived as Jesus did. We will have nothing to fear on the day of judgment for God's love perfected in us precludes punishment for wrong doing. If we love others, as He has loved us, we are simply responding to his love for us. And our love for God is shown in our love for one another. John make this very explicit: ***"For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen,"*** 1 John 4:20. Where love is, there is God. Where love is absent, so is God.

We must love those we see, not those we don't see. Love begins with those closest to us. It's easy to "love" people in Thailand or Bulgaria because they are always abstractions to us. Unless we go there, or know someone from there, how will our love ever be more than mere sentiment? We are to love those we have seen even though they are unlovely because that is precisely how God loves us. He sees us in all our un-loveliness and loves us anyway.

Transforming Love

Love when understood as divine power is indeed a mighty force for transformation. St. John describes this divine love: it is a passion for God that travels the way of the cross, the way of renunciation.

Like Christ himself, Christians must seek to offer love and truth. Not a self-righteous, legalism, but a genuine care for others, that arises from repentance of sin and clinging to Christ. Christ-followers live within the tension of love and truth, without diminishing either, and that is God's love. As Christians we need to fight harder for those we love and offer a far better gift than mere agreement with and affirmation of confusion and a way of life that God cannot bless.

Our U.M. Book of Discipline upholds the truth that "all persons are individuals of sacred worth." Our first obligation as Christians is to love others, empowered as we are by the Holy Spirit. If we cannot love someone – see someone through God's eyes – because of their past or present lifestyle and behaviors, then we have a bigger problem before God than the person we cannot accept. Not saying it's easy. God knows that humans, you, me, our family members, and friends, we are all swimming in a cultural sea that, as John reminds, is of this world, filled with original sin and all its derivatives. God forgive us when we float along with the world's morality and "truths."

But here is the real truth: we are deeply loved and wanted by a gracious God who found us worthy of the death of his Son, Jesus. And Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was powerful enough to pay the price for your sin and mine, and everyone else. Now that's true love.

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