

Living with Discernment



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When I made the very personal decision to accept God's love in Christ during my junior year in high school, friends from many different denominations began to urge me to join their church because they were founded on the New Testament. Having grown up in a church-going family of various denominations I already knew there were distinctions but I didn't understand the specifics. Two significant adult mentors taught me to first study the Bible, second to pray, and third to base my choice on the words and example of Jesus.

The world offers many ideas about God and faith. Denominations, like any human institution, tend to be self-congratulatory and dogmatic, but Jesus offers a radical understanding of God, salvation, and real life. We have already studied about the true faith that is built on God's love and grace that must play out in everyday living. Pay attention! John says: "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (v. 4).

"Discernment" means understanding, implies studious effort, and results in sound living. We have previously heard about the Gnosticism that denied Jesus, as God's redeemer, could ever have been a true physical manifestation of God because the material world is only a temporary, corrupt thing. For the gnostic this meant that it does not matter how you live or how you relate to people because nothing in this world has spiritual value. So much for moral standards or life values.

How does that kind of thinking relate to anything Jesus did or said? John squarely challenges Gnosticism and established world religions: "By this you know the spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (vv. 2-3). I don't know of any actual gnostics in our day, but I have found numerous instances of people who claim to believe in a god who cares little for morality, does not know the meaning

of love or compassion, offers prosperity and privilege, and are enshrined in their comfortable ignorance.

Jesus, the real flesh and blood Jesus, who healed the lame and blind, offered God's grace to enemies and outcasts, gathered little children in his arms with compassion, and died in our place on a criminal's cross, is the exclusive hope for the human soul. In Jesus alone will you discover and begin discerning how to live as a child of God.

John is particularly adept at putting the Christian faith in simple language while getting it so right! Here is John's concise test for faith: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who love is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (vv. 7-8). When the Apostle Paul was writing to a Corinthian church divided over who possessed special miraculous gifts (unknown tongues was at the center), Paul said that if we don't have a Jesus kind of love we have nothing (1 Corinthians 13)!

Observe the number of times John points us to love as the center Christian faith:

- Love is from God (v. 7)
- God is love (v. 8)
- God's love is revealed in his sending his only Son into the world (v. 9)
- We didn't initiate God's love, instead God chose to send his love to save us (v. 10)
- God's love motivates us to love others (v. 11)
- We don't see the physical person of God, but we do see Him in the daily expressions of his love in our living (v. 12)

In other words, while so many argue over who really are God's people, demand submission to their religious leaders and doctrinal statements, or claim spiritual superiority, we must understand that only through God's love made real in Jesus Christ are we able to live as God's people. There is no Christian faith without the gracious love of God.

All those words about love we speak are wonderful, but what is the source and practical application of love? Novels, television and poetry all speak of love. But this biblical word "love" doesn't fit our modern usage shaped by good feelings, selfishness, lust, and temporary

advantages. The New Testament word for love is based on an unselfish caring, extraordinary forgiveness, and hope beyond mental measure.

The only way we can live as God's beloved children is stated in verse 13: "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." The Holy Spirit who lives in each person who has surrendered life to God in Christ (v. 15) enables us to "know and believe the love that God has for us" (v. 16). Just as you cannot separate Jesus from God's love, neither can you separate love from God's Spirit. Jesus described God's Spirit to the Pharisee Nicodemus as an invisible but powerful wind beyond our power and control (John 3:8). God's Spirit works within our heart and mind, equipping us to love and help others, to be the presence of Christ in this complex world.

We often mistakenly see Jesus' disciples as men of unusual spiritual vision and strength, but reading the gospel accounts reminds us they were as awkward and unlearned as any of us. But they grew in faith, deepened in their ministries, and impacted their world. We all have to learn, which includes making mistakes as well as getting life right some of the time. The Christian life is a journey of discovery and growth, becoming more like our Savior, and loving those who need our help in experiencing God's grace. Discerning God's will and how to serve him comes only by experience.

The Apostle John is a gifted encourager for all of us who seek to follow Jesus. We want to understand how to serve the God who loves us so deeply. We want those around us to see the grace of God in spite of the evil and tragedies reported on our new programs. Sometimes it is so hard to think clearly, to understand how to show people a better way and share God's love and grace. John's original readers lived in a similar world, trying to discern how to live and what to say. It is in God's love that we find security and hope. Hear another apostle's encouraging words: Paul, who knew the hardest and most dangerous challenges says, "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).