

1 John 4:1-3,9-11

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1Jn 4:1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Dear Friends In Christ,

ABOUT BEING RIGHT AND BEING LOVING

I. Being Right OR Being Kind

The first line said it all, “Being Right, Being Kind, and How to Load the Dishwasher.” Ever been there? If it’s my gracious wife and I standing over the dishwasher, you can guess who was sure he was right and who was kind.

There is another saying: “You can be right, and you can be dead right—and then, what does it matter?” Think here of someone who sees an oncoming car in his lane of traffic and insists, “But this is my lane of traffic!” You might be right, but...

Wise King Solomon once said, “*Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why die before your time?*” (Ecclesiastes 7:16) I wonder for which uppity advisor he saved those precious words.

There are times in life when being right and being loving is an either/or proposition. And we humans like it that way. We prefer either/or answers. But what about the Christian. Is it either/or? Do we need to choose between being right and being loving? Is it that either you are a loving person, or you are a person who sticks to what the Bible says? Our text can help answer that question.

Like all the New Testament books we call Epistles, 1 John was not a history book like Genesis or Matthew. It was a book written, not so much about something, but to someone. John knew about a false teaching called Gnosticism among his friends. Gnosticism mixed Greek philosophies with the Christian religion.

Gnosticism had this view of the world: the mind and the spiritual are good; the material world, including the human body, is evil. The only way to “salvation” is a special knowledge and wisdom achieved by meditation. If it sounds a little bit like something you heard on Star Wars or about Buddhism, it is in many ways. Gnosticism’s “salvation” was to get away from the material world.

Now to 21st century Americans, that sounds pretty strange. We are practical, down-to-earth people. Rather than down-play the physical world, we are much more likely to say, “Seeing is believing.” We like what we can put our hands on.

But going back to Gnosticism, if the body is evil, and spirit is good, then you are going to have a problem with Jesus Christ. The problem is with Jesus as a human. Why in the world would the pig farmer wallow in the mud with the pigs? That is Gnostic thinking about straight up Christianity. Why would God be born and take up residence in a filthy human body? To them, God would not ever become human.

The Apostle John knew that that idea was out there. So John began this letter this way: *“That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.”* (1 John 1:1). “You guys say Jesus couldn’t have been true God in bodily form? Well, I heard him speak. I saw him. I, literally, rubbed shoulders with him. He was real.”

In our text, the fourth chapter, John presses home the point that the Gnostics are mistaken. All roads do not lead to heaven. What you believe matters far more than how much you believe it. ***“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits... This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God”*** (1-3).

The world around us tells us, “It doesn’t matter what you believe, just so you believe.” That is foolish when it comes to anything that matters. Its foolishness is easy to demonstrate. Take two students. One says two plus two equals five. Another says two plus two equals four. The “five” student shouts down the “four” student. Then he starts a chant and pretty soon the entire classroom is singing, “Two plus two is five!” The other student, however, sits to the side and quietly whispers, “But I am sure that two plus two equals four.” Meanwhile, everyone else continues in their way; a roomful of boisterous fivers, and one lonely fourer. Let me ask you: When the day of reckoning comes on the ACT test, who is going to get the math questions right? Some facts can’t be changed, however much you believe otherwise. A lonely correct answer is worth more than a crowded room full of shouted wrong answers—which pretty well illustrates the world in our day.

John’s message was specifically directed to people who heard the Gnostic teachings. And there were lots of learned people who shouted those teachings out. John told all who would listen that it doesn’t matter how wise and learned the other side sounded, ***“Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.”*** If you don’t have Jesus, you don’t have anything. He is the only sacrifice for sin.

But where did this strange Gnostic teaching start? --this teaching that matter is evil and spirit is good? I think it came from people who looked at themselves, like we all do, and wondered, “Why can’t I be the person I wish I could be? Why am I sometimes selfish? Why do I get into addictive behaviors? Why is this world such a mess?” The Gnostic suggested that maybe the problem is with the flesh and blood, the stuff we and the world are made of. If we could only be freed from this material world that pollutes all our good intentions, maybe then we would be better people and have a better world to live in.

We should have great sympathy for such people. They are trying to answer the big and difficult questions of life. But while sympathetic, we also know that a wrong answer doesn’t help. ***“Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.”*** He is the right answer. He is the answer to our sin, because he takes its guilt away. He is the right answer because he teaches us how to be truly loving in this messed up world.

Really, it is not really an issue of being right. Who cares about who is right? The question is, “What is the truth?”

II. Being Right AND Being Kind

When we stress that there are right and wrong beliefs, it can look like we are more interested in being right than being loving. Many people think that we are standing over the theological dishwasher saying, “Plates have to go here, facing this direction. And cups here and coffee cups there. And the way you are doing it is WRONG!”

If being right matters—and it does—is that all that matters? Is it possible that there is more to faith, more to Christianity, than being right?

The first half and the second half of our reading are almost like opposites. The first half talks about right belief like it is the only thing that matters. The second half of our reading sounds very different.

Listen to some words from the second half, ***“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”*** (10-11).

Only when we really and truly believe the truth about Jesus—only then can we really and truly love. Let me say it again. Only when we believe the truth about Jesus can we truly love.

The core truth of Christianity is that God became one of us, to die like us, to die because of us, to die for us to live. Christianity is a very earthy religion. The true God beyond all human understanding became one of us. And when you understand that truth, when you believe that Jesus willingly gave up not just a mansion, but freedom from pain, sorrow, and a whole lot more, to get down with the pigs in the mud hole. When people understand that, then people become truly loving. When you understand that the perfect Jesus took all the blame and shame and prison time and corporal punishment that our sins earned, and that we are free, then we can really love other people. When those burdens are lifted off my back, I want to be loving, just as God has loved me. I want to be the moon. I want to reflect the Son, not that bright thing in the daytime sky some 94 million miles away. I want to reflect the Son of God. I want to bring glory to his name even in the way I walk and smile and ride my bicycle and everything else about me. I hope that I will communicate Jesus’ love that I have felt in my life.

Yet... Yet I realize that I am not always loving. If my temper should get the better of me, and I get angry and insulting, I cannot brush it off thinking, “Oh, I just have a bad temper.” No. I do have a bad temper and that is sin because it shows that I do not love others as much as myself. That bad temper defames Jesus. It defames Jesus because when I insist that I know the truth about God and Jesus and all the rest, people see me as someone interested in being right, but not in being kind.

And so it is that again and again, I must return to those foundational truths, truths about love: ***“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*** Even me, who keeps falling into the same sins? Yes, me. But doesn’t me falling into sin after being saved kind of like negate that? That’s why it is so wonderful that Jesus became a person like us. He was tempted like us. And though he never gave in to those temptations, he understands.

So what does believing rightly and being loving look like in real life. Consider a current event like gay lifestyles. This enters the national spotlight every couple weeks. The right belief is clear from God’s will. It is sin. If we leave love out of the equation, sin is where it stops. But the Christian response is love. It is acknowledgement that such people likewise are loved by Christ and that they need to be brought to Christ. The loving response to this sin realizes that there might be people who struggle with this sin as much as you or I struggle with sins of laziness, untruthfulness, impatience, etc. For such, there is toleration, not of the sin, but of the one who struggles against this sin. As much as Jesus came to save them, so we can love them and help them. That is believing right and being loving.

Imagine the Christian faith as a diamond with many facets. One of the brightest shining facets is this: We can be both right and truly loving. May God grant us that humility that even as we are sure that God has placed a true and correct faith in our hearts, people will see God’s gracious love pouring through our thoughts, words and deeds, to our Savior’s glory. Amen.