

Loving the Truth

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
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No. 5: Summer of Love
Scripture: 1 John 4

Today we are going to talk about the glorious subject of the love of God. Before we do so we will use an invocation composed by Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Philosopher.

"How could love be rightly discussed if you were forgotten O God of love, source of all love in heaven and on earth. You who spared nothing but gave in love. You who are love, so the one who loves is what he is only by being in you." Amen

Two of the most wonderful words in the world are love and truth and John combines them both as he speaks about **Loving the Truth**. So, please turn to First John, chapter 4 in your Bible and take out your message outline as we continue our Summer of Love series.

John's great desire in his first letter is that we **know** the truth and we **know** that God loves us. He uses the word "**know**" 33 times in this epistle.

In this fourth chapter John addresses three problems I suspect all of us have pondered at some time.

John begins by dealing with the question **HOW DO WE KNOW WHO IS TELLING THE TRUTH?**

After all there are lots of people claiming to have the truth and they can't all be right.

John wants us to be discerning so we can tell the difference between truth and error.

When John was writing there were no creeds and no complete Bible. All sorts of people were claiming to speak for God. Some of them had a genuine word for the church but others were frauds.

It was essential that the first Christians could tell the difference. It is essential that we too can, "**Recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.**" (v 6)

So John tells us that when we encounter someone who is claiming to teach the truth we are to put them to the test.

First we are to **THINK**.

That is why John counsels, **"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." (v 1)**

Christians are not to be gullible.

We are to have a healthy skepticism.

We are not to leave our critical faculties at the door when we walk in a church.

God has given us minds and we are to use them.

Religion has always been an area that has been open to scams and has attracted its fair share of lunatics.

So when we come across some new teaching the first thing we are to ask is, "Are these ideas from God?"

Now the only way that we can answer that question is to be familiar with what God has revealed in scripture because God will not contradict what he has already said in his word. That is why we need to be diligent students of the Bible and develop a love for sound doctrine.

It is also helpful to have a knowledge of church history and understand how Christians in the past have faced similar issues. This will help us to think.

Then we are to **LISTEN**.

Particularly we are to listen to what people are saying about Jesus.

We are to ask does this teaching draw us closer to Christ or does it lead us away from him?

John goes on to provide us with this test of truth.

"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." (v 2-3)

This acknowledgement that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and is from God is central to Christianity.

It is a recognition that Jesus is fully divine as well as fully human and that Jesus is the only source of eternal life since he alone reveals the Father to us and atones for our sins. If Jesus is not our divine Lord his sacrifice on the cross would have a limited importance.

This means that Jesus becomes the touchstone for truth or error. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth he had a very simple test by which the true and false could be distinguished.

He said, **"No one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit."**

(1 Corinthians 12:3)

If we are to be positive about Christ we have to be negative about error. This is not an invitation to indulge in theological witch hunts but to recognize where the scripture draws the line between truth and falsehood.

In our relativistic age we constantly need to be reminded that some things are always true and others are always false. Truth is not just the present consensus of opinion. It is defined by the character of God.

It is important that we can recognize truth because error is not harmless. It is toxic to our soul.

John explains, **"This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."** (v 3)

Sometimes the Bible uses the word "antichrist" to describe an actual person who will come and take control of the earth.

But that is not the most common way the word is used. Antichrist is any person or idea that is opposed to Christ. Any thing that seeks to dethrone Christ as Lord reflects the spirit of antichrist and as Christians we need to be on the look out for it.

So how do we know who is telling the truth?

We must use our mind and ask are these ideas from God?

We must use our ears and listen to what the teachers are saying about Jesus.

Then we must **WATCH**.

Belief and behavior always go together so John tells us to watch how these teachers are living.

God's people will demonstrate a godly lifestyle.

Worldly people will have a carnal lifestyle.

John explains, **"They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them."** (v 5)

This counsel to watch how people live is helpful on a number of levels.

Next year we will have a national election.

Various candidates will be asking for our vote.

How do we determine who will make the best leader?

We can watch their lives.

For example if they can't control themselves they probably can't control the country.

The same truth applies to the church.

If a Bible teacher lives immorally away from the pulpit we should not heed what they say.

If a pastor can't lead their own family they certainly can't lead the family of God.

While there is much falsehood in the world John wants us to know that truth is much more powerful than error. Ultimately truth will always triumph for truth comes from God and his purposes are unstoppable.

So John encourages us with these words, **"You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."** (v 4)

Next John addresses the vital question **HOW DO WE KNOW THAT GOD LOVES US? (V 7-12)**

Most of us have asked this question at some time. Perhaps we lose a job we love, or we long to have children but none arrive, or we pray hard for a friend to get well but they die, or a relationship we had such hopes for comes to an end.

At such times well meaning Christians can tell us that God loves us but we wonder where the evidence is.

So John shows us.

He points first to **THE EVIDENCE OF TRANSFORMATION.**

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love." (v 7-8)

All of us have felt the flutterings of love at some time. Where did it come from?

John tells us, **"Love comes from God."** (v 7)

God is the source of all love.

Only human beings can love and that is because we are made in the image of the God who is love.

A person may not believe in God or even know that God exists but when they demonstrate love they are revealing that they are made in God's likeness.

Every human being enjoys some measure of love.

This is part of God's common grace given to each person. However, God goes further with those who know him.

He transforms us. To his own children he gives us the ability to love in supernatural ways.

When we see that we know that God loves us.

This is what John means when says, **"Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God."** (v 7)

Let's grasp this great truth.

God shows his love for us by enabling us to love others.

There is no limit to God's love which means there is no limit to how we can love others.

Do you see what this means?

It means we can become a more loving person.

Perhaps we are having difficulty with a relationship.

We don't love the person, we may even hate them but we can ask God to give us his love for them.

This can change family life. It can restore marriages.

For the love God gives us doesn't just love in response to affection. It loves even when the object of our love is indifferent to us. John's point is that I can know that God loves me if I can love you.

Then we know that God's loves us because of **THE EVIDENCE OF CALVARY.**

John goes on to explain, **"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. This is love; not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (v 9-10)**

Last month Gretchen and I spent a week at a Christian Conference Center called Lee Abbey in Devon.

We enjoyed a week of prayer, study, worship and great teaching. However, Lee Abbey is in a valley and there is no cell phone reception.

The staff would say, "If you want a signal for your cell phone you must go to the cross."



What they meant was that there are three crosses at the top of the hill. When you went up to the cross you could talk on the phone.

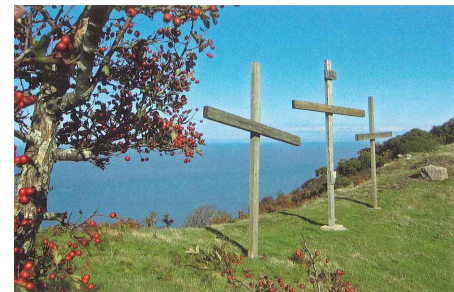
You could communicate.

That is a great parable of the Christian faith.

If we are not receiving any signal of God's love in our heart, then we must go to Calvary.

For the cross is the supreme evidence that God really and truly loves us.

It is because of the cross that we can talk to God.



At those times of physical, emotional and spiritual agony that we will all experience in a fallen world we must go to Calvary. There is the midst of dreadful suffering we see proof of God's love for us.

In addition we know that God loves us by **THE EVIDENCE OF OTHER BELIEVERS.**

John explains, **"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." (v 11-12)**

If you wonder if God loves you look at the way other Christians treat you. Perhaps you say, "But some Christians have been unkind to me."

That's right, they have. We are all imperfect.

We all fail from time to time.

But don't dwell on those who hurt you.

Think for a moment of those who have shown you kindness and understanding and generosity.

That is an expression of the love of God for you.

Dr. Francis Schaeffer used to live here in Rochester.

He described such love as, "The ultimate apologetic" for the Christian faith. What he meant was that the Christian's love for one another is the best proof for God's existence.

I am so grateful for this ultimate apologetic you demonstrate to me. When my own faith is low you lift me up by the love you show to me and to others.

I enjoy walking around this facility because I see people every week filling backpacks with food for hungry kids.

I see church members donating their time to help build the Center. I see people praying for one another and planning ways that our church can help others like the Walk for Water next Saturday.

Just this week, I received a letter from a man in this community I have never met. He wanted me to know that one of our church members has blessed him so much by looking after him when he was sick.

A young resident was telling me about her mentor who is such a tremendous example and encouragement to her.

He is a member of this church.

You are letting your light shine before others and they are glorifying God as a result.

Third John helps us with the essential question **HOW DO WE KNOW WE ARE SAVED? (v 13-21)**

This question tends to arise at various times in our lives. I have noticed that people often ask it as they approach death. They realize they are soon going to stand before God and they wonder how the interview will go. They want to know that they are right with the Almighty.

It also crops up when we meet people of other religions. They can be so very confident in their faith.

We begin to wonder if the Muslims or the Hindus or the Mormons or the Buddhists are right.

Maybe Jesus Christ isn't the way to God.

It can even happen when we meet other Christians. Sometimes we come across believers who have some extraordinary experience. We get the message that if we haven't spoken in tongues or had some supernatural miracle that we are not really part of the family of God.

So John tackles this subject of Christian certainty again. He has brought it up at least once in every chapter and now he returns to it. There is a good reason for this. The doctrine of assurance is a very important one. Our doubts about our salvation can occur repeatedly and so we need to address them regularly.

So John provides three tests on how we can be sure we are saved. Each applies to a separate part of our personality. This is very helpful because we are all different. One test will help one person while a second test will help another. Sometimes the first test will help us today and the second test will help us next week. So how can we be sure we are saved?

First, **BY THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT.**

John writes, **"We know that we live in him and he is us, because he has given us of his Spirit." (v 13)**

This is primarily an emotional test of our salvation.

We feel the Holy Spirit within us.

Paul says, **"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." (Romans 8:16)**

Do you know what it is to feel God's presence in prayer?

Do you find your heart going out to God in worship and praise?

If you do, then these convictions are the result of the Holy Spirit's work within you.

This is the Spirit testifying to your spirit that you are a child of God.

Second we know we are saved **BY THE GIFT OF FAITH.**

John writes, **"If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God." (v 15)**

This is an intellectual test of our salvation.

Some of us are more comfortable in this area.

We are cognitive people. We like ideas.

We are captivated by the doctrines of Christianity.

The Christian faith is based on certain historical facts. The most important is listed here. **"The Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world." (v 14)**

John says if we believe these statements about Jesus and have acknowledged him as our Savior then we can be sure we are saved.

We may not have a great emotional experience.

But we can be confident of our salvation for the Christian life begins with belief.

Third we can be sure we are saved **BY THE GIFT OF LOVE.**

John continues, **"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of Judgment, because in this world we are like him." (v 16-17)**

This is a practical test of our salvation.

If we truly belong to God we will demonstrate his family traits.

God is love so we will be loving.

God is merciful so we will be merciful.

God is forgiving so we will be forgiving.

John gives us both a positive and a negative behavioral test. If our faith is genuine we will love but we won't fear. This is logical because God doesn't fear and if God is living within us then we will be like him.

John explains, **"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." (v 18)**

John is informing us of a comforting truth.

If the love of God has come into our life we do not need to live in dread of some calamity falling on us or being judged for our past sins or being penalized for not making more progress in our Christian lives.

God is not waiting with a big stick to beat us every time we fall, because he loves us.

John also recognizes that it is easy to say that we love God. It costs us nothing and who wants to say they hate God. So he adds some words of clarification

"If anyone says, "I love God, yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother." (v 20-21)

John is telling us that a person who does not love the people that God has made cannot claim to belong to that God. If we are always impatient and critical of others we have every reason to wonder if we know God at all.

John Calvin noted, "It is a false boast when anyone says that he loves God but neglects his image which is before his eyes."

God wants his children to know that they are his.

Yet realistically none of us will have complete assurance all the time.

The Christian faith is like a walk.

Gretchen and I have done a lot of walking in the past few weeks. We have covered over 150 miles on the Coastal Path of England and Jersey.

There were days when the sun was shining and the walking was easy and the scenery was spectacular.

God was in his heaven and all was right with the world.

But there were other days when it poured with rain and all we could see was clouds and the going was hard and slippery. We were tempted to give up and we wondered why we had ever left Rochester for this.

But we pressed on through the shadows and the storms until suddenly the sun came out again and our spirits lifted.

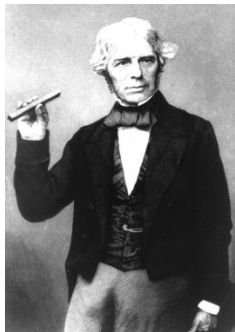


And so it is with assurance. Some days God is very present and at other times he seems far way. On those days we just keep going, trusting God one step at a time until once again we feel the sunshine of his love upon us.

So if you are not sure you are saved, make sure. Trust Christ as your Savior.

Ask God to open the heavens and reveal himself to you.

Remember he is the God of all truth and the God of all love. He wants you to be confident that he will never let you go.



Michael Faraday, the physicist who built the first electric motor and stated the basic laws of electricity was asked by some of his students as he neared death, "What are your speculations now?" Faraday replied, "Speculations I have none. I am resting on certainties."

Then slowly and deliberately he said, **"For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."**
(2 Timothy 1:12)