

August 23, 2009

Matthew: Celebrating God's Love

Purpose: To celebrate God's love for us as expressed in Jesus' birth

Key Bible reference: Matthew 1:18-25, 1 John 4

Key Verse: 1 John 4:9

Biblical Interpretation

First John 4 deals with two basic themes—belief and love—that the elder (the writer) recommends as guidelines for testing the spirits of true and false prophets. Jesus had promised the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17), and prophets had arisen in the early church claiming that this Spirit was coming through them. These prophets were the first charismatic leaders of the church, speaking for God and giving direction in a time before the more official structure of bishops and deacons had emerged. In this chapter the elder uses his authority representing the tradition of the community to urge his readers to discern the truth and to test the spirits.

First John 4:1-6 addresses this question as prelude to our Bible lesson. Verse 1 states the need to test the spirits in the midst of many false voices. Verses 2 and 3 state the first criterion—belief. We must distinguish between those who believe that Christ has come in the flesh (the basis of the Christmas story), who are from God, and those who do not, who are antichrists. Verse 4 affirms that the Spirit of God in the faithful is more powerful than the spirit of the antichrist at work in the world. Verses 5 and 6 give the second criterion—receptivity. Some people listen to the world and some to the faith community; only the latter belong to God.

In 1 John 4:1, the term of address shifts from the "little children" used elsewhere in the letter to "beloved," suggesting a greater degree of intimacy. The verb *test* refers to the inspection of coins to separate the genuine from the counterfeit. The phrase "gone out into the world" indicates that the false prophets have defected from the faith community to adopt alien values and lifestyles. Believing they could not be affected by the world because of their "knowledge," these gnostics openly became involved in immoral practices. They even deceived themselves into believing that they could not sin.

The confession of faith in 1 John 4:2 is reminiscent of earlier statements in 1 Corinthians 12:3 ("Jesus is Lord.") and John 20:31 ("Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.") but adds the element of "come in the flesh." The false preachers in this later period were emphasizing the divine nature of Jesus Christ over the human nature. But the Christmas message of Matthew 1:20-21, the Gospel passage for this lesson, is that the human child Jesus, conceived in Mary, is "from the Holy Spirit" and is thus a union of both human and divine. Neither aspect is complete by itself; neither should take precedence over the other.

That the contest between alternative views of truth was a real struggle for the early church is attested to by the use of "conquered" in 1 John 4:4, a verb used several times in the letter to refer to overcoming "the evil one" (2:13-14),

"them" (4:4), and "the world" (5:4-5). Those who conquer are those who have been born of God and who believe that Jesus is God's Son.

The elder assures the faithful of victory in the struggle of truth with falsehood, even though the defectors may be more prosperous, numerous, or influential. The faithful will conquer because the spirit in the community is stronger than the spirit of the antichrist, and the defectors to the world are now dominated by the world ruler (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The difference between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error may be hard to detect, since both speak persuasively with commitment and enthusiasm. But those who are "from God" know the difference because they are guided by the Holy Spirit rather than by the spirit of deception (Satan).

This sharp dualism between the people of God and the antichrist was obviously quite clear to the elder; but it may have been more problematic for his readers, as it often is for us, who see the ambiguity in most of the messages we receive. There are different emphases or interpretations, to be sure; but it is sometimes hard to see one as all true and another as completely false. We need continually to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in prayer and to ponder the validity of conflicting messages in light of the criteria cited in this letter—faith and love.

When confronted by prophetic voices who claim inspiration but who threaten the unity of the church, we can apply two tests: What are the fruits of their followers? and What is the validity of their message? Paul in Galatians contrasts the works of the flesh ("fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness,

carousing" [5:19-21]) with the fruits of the Spirit ("love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" [5:22-23]). The quality of life in the followers reflects the quality of the leader's message.

The validity of the message itself, the second criterion, can be measured by pondering how well the message reflects the nature of God as revealed in Jesus the Son:

(1) God is love. God wants us to do the loving thing as well. If the message is loving, we can be certain that it is of God.

(2) God acts for justice and peace. God wants us to act in ways that foster justice and peace, locally and globally, as well. If the message is one of justice and peace, we can be certain that it is of God.

(3) God is self-giving. God teaches that it is more blessed to give than to receive. God wants our decisions to lead us to give of ourselves as well rather than to protect ourselves. If the message is about sacrificial giving, we can be certain that it is of God.

(4) God is seeking. God seeks us and all creation to be reconciled with him. God wants us to seek others as well to be reconciled to one another and to God. If the message is about seeking others and reconciling with them, we can be certain that it is of God.

(5) God suffers when anyone gets hurt. God wants us to become involved redemptively in other people's pain as well. If the message is about redemptive suffering, we can be certain that it is of God.

(6) God forgives us when we choose wrongly and repent. God wants us to forgive others as

well rather than to adopt a self-righteous, judgmental attitude. If the message is about forgiveness, we can be certain that it is of God.

When we face situations of ambiguity and uncertainty and lack the clarity of the elder in distinguishing between "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error," guidelines like these can help us discern what God is calling us to be and to do. We must also keep in mind that God's world is full of ambiguity and uncertainty, requiring us to take the leap of faith. As aspects of faith, risking and choosing are also of God.

The theme of 1 John 4:7-21 is the perfect love of God, the love that "came down at Christmas." Verses 7-10 speak of the source of this love, verses 11-16a of the experience of love, and verses 16b-21 of the confidence of perfect love.

1 John 4:7-8: the source of perfect love. Here, as at the beginning of the chapter, the readers are addressed with the intimate "beloved," a fitting way to begin a discourse on perfect love. Those who are urged to love others are themselves loved by God, the source of all love. Because God loves us, we must "love one another" (3:11, 14; 4:7, 11-12) and love our brothers and sisters (2:10; 3:10; 4:20-21).

The phrase in verse 8, "God is love," sums up the heart of the Christian faith in three short words. Love is central to the character of God; he requires nothing of us that he does not himself express.

Those who love are born of God. A mark distinguishing the faithful from the deserters is that the former practice love for their fellow Christians, thereby showing that they have internalized something of God's character and are giving expression to it as God's children.

Knowledge of God is manifested, not in abstract wisdom or learned discourse, but in concrete acts of caring and compassion. The defectors, on the other hand, show that they do not know God by their lack of love for their Christian brothers and sisters.

Verses 9-10. These verses give the Christmas message, told so beautifully in Matthew 1:18-25, in a nutshell. The source of love, God, sent his Son that we might have life, eternal and abundant. Love does not originate with human effort or emotion but in God's gift of Jesus to save us from our sin (see Matthew 1:21). Here Christmas and Easter are also linked together. The loving gift of Bethlehem is fulfilled in the loving death on Calvary, through which we receive redemption and life.

Verses 11-16a. The experience of perfect love. The response of Christians to God's amazing gift of love through Christ must be to express this love to one another. We do not see God directly, but we have seen God in Jesus and continue to see God in one another as manifested in acts of mutual love. We know that God lives in us because the Holy Spirit empowers us to testify by word and deed that God loves us, Christ saves us, and God's love is expressed through us to others in our everyday lives. When we publicly bear witness to our belief in Jesus as the Son of God, we are carrying on the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Two marks distinguish those in whom God dwells: We believe in Jesus as God's Son (4:15), and we love one another (4:12).

Verses 16b-21: the confidence of perfect love. This experience of God's love gives us confidence for the Last Judgment. The three emphases of these verses are:

(1) The nature of God's love is expressed in the mutual indwelling of God in us and us in God (4:16b).

(2) Because God lives in us, we have nothing to fear (4:17-18).

(3) To claim to love God while not loving our fellow Christians is deceitful (4:19-21).

The unfaithful defectors do not dwell in God, should fear the Last Judgment, and reveal their errors in their lack of love. But death and the Last Judgment hold no threat for the believer; the perfect love of God dwelling in our hearts gives us confidence that we are redeemed and empowers us to love our sisters and brothers.

Thus we see that the perfect love that has its origin in the very being of God was manifested in the Christmas gift of God's Son, Jesus; builds Christian community; distinguishes between true and false faith in terms of who manifests love for brothers and sisters; and casts out the fear of death and judgment.