

2 JOHN 7-11

(Readings: 1 John 2:1-27; Matthew 7:15-23)

Learn Not To Turn!

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Let me play the Psychologist. I will say a word, and you will reflect on the first picture which comes to your mind.

So think about the image which forms in your thoughts with this particular word: "Heretic".

What did you think? A fierce student – that radical with sharp tongue and penetrating eyes? Perhaps the person you thought of is a contemptuous, arrogant, self-assured and sophisticated upper middle-class intellectual-type? Even, maybe, a creature with fangs and a really nasty character? The word "heretic" usually brings up these kinds of descriptions.

But probably it would be more accurate to describe someone quite the opposite. He has a ready smile, a warm handshake, and a gentle, friendly way about him. As to their image, and with only a few exceptions, heretics are really nice people!

Not that there's anything wrong with being "nice". We know we must present ourselves in a Christ-like manner, because it is Jesus' character we want to imitate. But it's something we must realise, that, as we go through Scripture, looking at the description of the false teachers, we see they are very deceptive. They are not what they appear to be; and there are lots of them.

In Matthew 7 verse 15 Jesus warns against wolves in sheep's clothing. Peter writes in his second letter chapter 2, verse 1, about those "secretly" bringing in destructive heresies. Paul to the Colossians speaks in chapter 2 verse 4 about those who will deceive with "fine-sounding" arguments. And don't forget Paul's opposing those extremely popular "super-apostles" in 2nd Corinthians 11 verse 5.

In this way we come to the first aspect to our text. Here we see that WE DISCERN BY KNOWING THE WRONG WAY.

The apostle John says exactly the same as Jesus, Peter, and Paul, in his second letter, verse 7. Having drawn out the absolute importance of the truth and of living that truth through the Lord's commands, in the verses 1 till 6, he moves on to show how there are those standing against this. Verse 7 continues a direct flow from verse 6, where the apostle had been speaking about walking in love.

So we could well image him to begin verse 7 with the words: 'What I have just said means this ... As a result of the truth and of men and women living in that truth, there will be falsehood and men and women living lives which are a lie.' "Many deceivers" John describes them as. They are called *playnoy* in the Greek.

They are not a few; not one or two every hundred years or so; they are many. And they are “deceivers”; not only horrible, awkward, rough-as-guts kind of people, but more often than not very smooth, gift-of-the-gab type of people. Perhaps, most deceitfully of all, they can seem to be the most sincere and loving people.

You can't really see what they're like by what you see on the outside. We can know, as John writes, that they don't have the same belief about Jesus. They might well say he was a fine man, that he was an historical person, that he set good moral guidelines, that he was a good example to others ... but not that he was God's Son.

“Hey, hang on”, one may say, “but here John says that they don't acknowledge Jesus as having come in the flesh. That is quite different from saying he was actually here, and that he wasn't God's Son.”

The context tells otherwise. You see, the heresy very influential then was “gnosticism”. This essentially said that Jesus was not physically on earth; rather he was an appearance.

They said this because they believed anything fleshly was inherently evil, and so only spiritual things really mattered. While they said Jesus was on earth, they did not believe he was here as in our shared humanity. Thus he was not both God and man according to them - only God; and so neither is he God's only begotten Son. They were demeaning our Lord as much as any modern liberal!

John responded to their false teaching. Indeed, he has to! The situation is such that with the many churches now scattered around the Roman Empire there was the ever-present threat of this false teaching devastatingly misleading even more of them.

And the way in which many of them were to be cared for was by the preaching and teaching of itinerant ministers who travelled from city to city, church to church. These men would stay a while and help out with the preaching and teaching. As long as they had a place to stay, where they were fed, that was fine.

There was no denominational structure as we have it today; nor any wider fellowship in which accountability could take place. No credentials were handed in from the previous church or presbytery that they had served. So the local church had to know what to watch out for – hence the warning from John!

And thus we come to a second aspect. From discerning by knowing the wrong way WE DISCERN BY KNOWING THE RIGHT WAY.

The Spirit of the Lord, through John, the ancient “apostle of love”, does something many Christians of our time would see as most unloving. For John says there is a standard, a God-given criteria, by which to judge one's orthodoxy. This was the rule of verse 7 which meant that they had to confess ‘Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh’.

Perhaps it appears very straight-forward to us. We certainly believe that our Lord came in the flesh; thus he was fully divine and fully human. Yet it tackled not only that heretical gnosticism which denied Jesus had ever come in the flesh; it went further and addressed a semi-gnosticism, which, though

acknowledging Jesus had once been in the flesh, now said he was purely spiritual.

This is evident in the confession to be acknowledged. “Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” was not the simple past tense we may assume from the English translation. It is actually the present continuous tense in the Greek. Thus, in a very clear, basic manner, much error was covered by this simple creed.

This was not the first time John had addressed such heresy. In his first letter chapters 2, 4 and 5, he had been quite frank with the brethren. As he explained it in chapter 4, verses 2 and 3: “This is how you can recognise 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. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”

As has been noted, 2nd John goes even further with what needs to be confessed. But there is that common warning against the evil spirit; the evil spirit who is even named personally as “the antichrist”.

It is strong language; people they would have known are identified as heretics. In our age and in the general church scene today, this would be particularly frowned upon. It would not be appropriate for one to imply that any clergyman would be a liberal, because he denied the virgin birth of our Lord, rejected his bodily resurrection, and dismissed altogether any idea of personal sin.

“You see”, many would point out, “he does so much for charity. And wasn’t he on the Easter march with all those other Christians? He cried out with thousands of others ‘Jesus is Lord!’ He was even a keynote speaker.”

Rather than considering the principle, Christians now point out the personal; just as many evangelical and reformed churches have shifted allegiance to the subjective instead of the objective. One will hear often nowadays of personal “journeys” and “stories” but not the facts of **his** journey and **his** story.

However appealing one’s ‘story’ may be, though, if it is not a public telling of Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, then we openly declare a heresy. And if the church does not hold on to that confession of whom Jesus Christ is, then she will lose what she already has as well.

Church history has shown that within a generation a denomination can lose its biblical roots. One example is the Free Church of Scotland which, a century and a half ago, became extremely liberal within a twenty year period. And this, mind you, happened just after The Great Disruption of 1843 when they themselves had separated from the Church of Scotland.

Unless the church holds fast to her confession; unless she watches herself that she does not lose what she has worked for; she will lose it. A denomination may have the finest of Biblical Confessions; the theological college may have a huge range of books by good solid biblical and godly theologians; but unless it’s actually practiced it’s as useless as the paper it is written on!

And so we come to a third aspect in relation to the text. Here we note that WE DISCERN BY KNOWING HOW TO KNOW.

Why does John speak of being rewarded fully in 2nd John 8, if it is not for the same reason Jesus has in speaking about our accountability? We know this reward cannot be about earning our way into heaven. It must be about keeping hold of what we already have.

In that sense, our growing in faith is nothing more than being made more aware of what we are in Christ Jesus. Verse 9 is very precise about this; it gives additional teaching about how to be aware of when things begin to go wrong.

Notice how it begins: "Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God." Though one may well wonder, what is this going on ahead? Cornelius van der Waal comments here: "The church may not join the progressives who favour going ahead but fail to abide in the doctrine of Christ. To preach this kind of progress is to declare that God is changeable, that his will and commandments change. The heretics with their new doctrines are always talking about progress. Yet, those who follow them don't in fact progress. Why? Because they lose what they have gained if they don't cling to the old doctrine. Only those who abide in the old doctrine "have" the Father and the Son."

We may think that we will always believe that God does not change; and that the gospel will be faithfully preached. But then we are wiser than God himself! He told us it will happen.

It could have begun in what seemed a harmless way. It was only the one-time; it wouldn't happen again; they would be more careful ... but they were not; it did happen again ... and again ... and again!

And it was not that as long as the message was non-offensive, it would be alright; so that as long as the travelling preacher avoided trouble it was fine. Rather, **he has to bring "this teaching"**.

In the Greek this is distinctly called teaching - *didache*. The teaching which was nothing other than the Apostolic Teaching. It was the confession of a Bible-believing minister which had to come through in whatever he said or did.

So the congregation should have these sorts of questions in their minds: Was he Christ-centred? Is what he is preaching lining up with the rest of the Word?

You only need to consider the Bereans of Acts 17 for the right response. They checked out that the Apostle Paul himself was scriptural!

Or would those Christians begin to be taught this view, as found in a Reformed Church magazine: "The Lord is saying to his Church, "TURN" into this new wind. It will mean laying down the ways we have always done things, listening for the direction of the new wind of the Spirit, and when we feel that wind, turning our sails into it." And further on it said: "It is from this place that the new direction will come as God speaks a fresh word into their lives."

Now this is running ahead! This is precisely when we must stand for the faith, and show muscle for what we are in the Lord. For, as verse 10 says: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting."

It is in this way we come to a fourth aspect to the text. This is where WE DISCERN BY KNOWING WHAT TO DO WITH THE WRONG.

Those travelling preachers depended on local accommodation. If that was not forthcoming, they had to go; that was a major part of their work-place agreement! So the church had to put bite to its bark.

Not only must they insist on orthodoxy; they must make that orthodoxy work by being right behind it. There was no possible way any allowance was to be given to the wrong belief. It was a poison that so quickly spreads through the whole church.

John ends this section very strongly about this. In verse 11 he declares, "...whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works." The Church must have nothing to do with those not bringing the apostolic teaching.

Anyone who did not preach and teach simply the gospel, who did not proclaim Christ's doing and dying, with nothing changed and with nothing added to it, we officially must not support. If it means withdrawing our involvement from a vast range of ecumenical gatherings and prayer meetings, so be it!

The apostle is not saying that personally we cannot interact with these people. Sometimes you can't help avoid that. And maybe the Lord could use us to lead them back to the truth. But we must be fully aware of the danger and of what happens when we mix with it. There must be a continual awareness about the dangers impinging upon the Church. We must not feed them!

The problem stated in this ancient letter is not antiquated. In our time the struggle of the church is still around the question of what Christian love really is. According to the present-day successors of those heretics in John's time, Christian love is about getting together and throwing away those doctrines which keep us apart. That's progressive, that is what going on ahead means today. "Let's get ecumenical" they sing, as they throw out the "old" teaching.

But those who wish to "abide" in "truth" and "love" see things quite differently. They are not polite and compliant when faced with heresy. They know that not dealing firmly with heresy is giving up truth and love, as well as giving up the true unity of the apostles with the Christ. This is the true unity of John chapter 17.

Parents know that being truly loving is to be firm with their children. If you cannot give them clear guidelines on how to behave, and what will happen if they disobey, there will be devastating consequences.

In the same way, the Lord gives us these words to guide us. We must walk in obedience to his commands.

Congregation, let's then live as those who are his. Let's live as children of the chosen lady.

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

Lord God, you are so loving towards us. We have your Word clearly spelt out for us. And we have your Spirit which guides and keeps us in that Word.

Help us then to hold on to the true doctrines. Don't let us be swayed by what is popular and trendy but make us always watch ourselves.

And help us to be honest with those around us. Even if they are those who don't believe in you at all! Or if they are those who say they believe in you but live a different way than your way.

For it is in Jesus Christ's saving and ruling Name alone that we pray.
Amen.