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## DISCERNING LOVE

Philippians 1:9-11

By

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Philippians Lesson 5

## Discerning Love Philippians 1:9-11

We all must avoid two extremes in the Christian life if we wish to grow to maturity. On the one hand are those who are prone to *live by subjective feelings*, devoid of doctrine. They love to sing over and over, "Oh, How I Love Jesus" and other such songs, with hands lifted up, swaying with the music. They think that doctrine is divisive, that what we need is *life*, by which they mean a subjective feeling that comes over them when they "get in the spirit."

They also say that we *don't* need to *emphasize truth*, but rather, *love*. They're fond of saying, "Jesus didn't say the world will know that we are His disciples by our doctrine, but by our love." So they emphasize unity with anyone who names the name of Christ, no matter how erroneous their doctrine. They call for accepting all professing Christians, no matter what they believe or how they live. Such feeling-oriented Christians are not living in line with Scripture. They are imbalanced and will get into great trouble.

The other extreme we need to avoid is the precise opposite. These people *emphasize knowledge* and correct doctrine, but in practice they deny biblical love. They redefine love so narrowly that they can excuse their harsh attitudes toward those who disagree with them on some fine point of doctrine. They avoid confronting the coldness of their hearts toward God and His people by congratulating themselves on being "correct" doctrinally. In other words, they're *all head*, but *no heart*.

The Bible, however, presents a fine balance between head and heart. Biblical Christianity means loving God and others fervently, from the heart; but also, such love is in line with God's truth as revealed in His Word. Love for God or others that is not based on truth is just deluded emotionalism. But truth devoid of love leads to arrogance.

As I've mentioned before, my spiritual heroes are men who combine these two qualities: a fervent heart for God coupled with solid, biblical theology. John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles

Spurgeon, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones were all men of this caliber. Their lives were dedicated to knowing and expounding God's Word of truth, but never in a cold, academic manner. They studied God's truth so that they and others would grow into a deeper love for God and others.

Of course, the Lord Jesus combined perfectly this balance between love and truth. In the very chapter in which He prayed that His followers would be unified, He also prayed that they may be sanctified by God's Word of truth (John 17:17, 21). The Apostle Paul also was a man marked by both love and truth. His prayer for the Philippian church, which was experiencing some friction between some of its members, is marked by a fine balance. He prays that they would abound in love; but, he adds that such love is inextricably bound up with real knowledge and all discernment. He is teaching us that:

Christians must grow in discerning love so  
that their godly lives give glory to God.

Paul's prayer shows us not only how we should be living, but also how we should be praying for other Christians. So often our prayers are devoid of solid or thoughtful content: "God bless the missionaries. God be with Aunt Suzy. God help Brother Bob." But Paul's prayers always reflect profound doctrine. They were never based just on feelings, but are always rich in theology as well.

Before we examine the content of this prayer, notice one other factor that gives needed balance to our Christian lives. In verse 6, Paul expressed his confidence that God, who began a good work in the Philippians, would complete the job. Those who are out of balance take such words and conclude, "Fine, then we don't need to do anything. God started it; God will complete it; we can sit back and watch Him do it apart from any effort on our part."

But Paul, who knew that it was God who started the work and God who would finish it, was still actively involved in the process of getting that work done! He prayed fervently for these people. He exhorted them and taught them. A proper belief in the sovereignty of God never leads to stoic passivity, but rather to diligent, fervent labor. And it never leads to prayerlessness. Rather, understanding

God's sovereignty should move us to pray, since God uses prayer to accomplish His sovereign purpose. Let's examine Paul's prayer:

1. Biblical love for God and others is the supreme virtue of the Christian life.

You may have assumed that Paul's prayer is directed toward love of the brethren, but please notice that he does not state the object of love. Of course, love for God and love for others can't be separated. As John puts it, "God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.... And this is the commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:16, 21). Love is not optional for the believer. It is bound up with the very essence of being a Christian. As John again puts it, "We know that we have passed out of death in life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death" (1 John 3:14). Jesus summed up the Law with the two commandments, to love God and to love our neighbor (Matt. 22:37-40). If you are not growing in love for God and others, you're not growing.

But, what is biblical love? The word "love" conjures up warm, fuzzy, sentimental feelings of being nice all the time to everyone. But we must define love by Scripture, not by our cultural notions. Biblical love is never in opposition to truth, but rather is based on and is in line with truth. Biblical love is a caring, self-sacrificing commitment that seeks the highest good of the one loved. In our text, Paul says that ...

- A. Biblical love is bound up with knowledge and discernment.

We think of love as being indiscriminating. Discrimination and love seem like opposites. But Paul prays that the Philippians would grow in discerning love. Love is not blind. It does not close its eyes to reality. It is not a feeling devoid of content. Biblical love is related to true knowledge and it operates with careful discernment.

*"True knowledge"* is a single Greek word (*epignosis*) that refers to intensive or deep spiritual knowledge. The Greek scholar, J. B. Lightfoot, says that this word "is used especially of the knowledge of God and of Christ, as being the perfection of knowledge" (St.

*Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* [Zondervan], p. 138. See Eph. 1:17; 4:13). Since God cannot be known except as He has revealed Himself, such true knowledge of God can only be obtained through His Word. Since God Himself is love, to grow in the true knowledge of God is to grow to understand what true love is.

This true knowledge of God as revealed in His Word is essential if you want to grow in love. We can't know love by looking at our culture. We can only know what love looks like by studying the character of God, especially as revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, God in human flesh. Was Jesus always syrupy and sweet with people? Read Matthew 23, where He lays into the Pharisees! Notice how He sometimes confronts the disciples. Yet He is the epitome of love!

I've occasionally received criticism that I am lacking in love because I confront sin. A former elder's wife in California told me that I should get out of the pastorate because I was too much like Paul and not enough like Jesus! When I asked for clarification of that comment, she explained that Jesus was always nice and loving, but Paul was not like that! I'm not sure which translation she was reading! I don't deny that I need to grow in love. But confronting sin is not an evidence of a lack of love! Biblical love is based on the true knowledge of God.

Also, biblical love is bound up with *discernment*. This Greek noun occurs only here in the New Testament, but a related verb occurs in Hebrews 5:14: "But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Since biblical love is both holy and based on truth, we cannot love properly if we lack discernment.

John MacArthur's recent book, *Reckless Faith* [Crossway Books], is a plea for discernment among American Christians, many of whom have abandoned this crucial quality. He shows how we have become anti-intellectual, trusting in feelings (as seen in the charismatic movement) or in tradition (as seen in the recent Catholic-Protestant rapprochement) and have thrown Scripture and sound reason to the wind. He defines discernment as "the ability to understand, interpret, and apply truth skillfully. Discernment is a cognitive act. Therefore no one who spurns right doctrine or

sound reason can be truly discerning" (p. xv). Commenting on our text, he states,

Those who think of faith as the abandonment of reason cannot be truly discerning. Irrationality and discernment are polar opposites. When Paul prayed that the Philippians' love would "abound still more and more in real *knowledge* and all *discernment*" (Phil. 1:9, emphasis added), he was affirming the rationality of true faith. He also meant to suggest that knowledge and discernment necessarily go hand in hand with genuine spiritual growth.

Biblical faith, therefore, is rational. It is reasonable. It is intelligent. It makes good sense. And spiritual truth is meant to be rationally contemplated, examined logically, studied, analyzed, and employed as the only reliable basis for making wise judgments. That process is precisely what Scripture calls *discernment* (pp. xv, xvi).

The mood today is that if you are critical of anyone's doctrine or personal life, no matter how unbiblical it may be, you are not loving and you are arrogant to judge this person. Jesus' words, "Judge not, lest you be judged" (Matt. 7:1) are wrenched out of context and misapplied. If people would just keep reading, Jesus goes on to say, "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine" (Matt. 7:6). How can you determine if someone is a dog or swine if you don't make discerning judgments? A few verses later He warns us to beware of false prophets who come as wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). It takes a discerning sheep to see that this isn't a fellow-sheep whom we need to embrace, but a ravenous wolf we need to avoid!

Thus biblical love cannot be divorced from the true knowledge of God and from the discernment between truth and error and right and wrong that comes from a careful knowledge of Scripture.

B. Biblical love is a quality in which we must continually grow.

The Philippians were a loving people, as evidenced in their relationship with Paul. But he prayed that their love would abound

still more and more. No one can say that they have arrived at perfect love for God and others.

This means that biblical love is something we need to work at constantly. Did you give any thought to it this week? Husbands, are you working at loving your wife? Wives, are you working at loving your husband? Parents, are you working at loving your kids? Kids, are you working at loving your parents? Singles, are you working at loving your roommate? It's a lifelong process.

One place to start is to study the many biblical references of the word "love." Jot down on a card and memorize Paul's great description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7: "Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

At the heart of biblical love is self-sacrifice. Christ loved us and gave Himself for us (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:25; John 3:16). So many sincere Christians have been sucked into the popular false teaching that we must build our own and our children's self-esteem. But this is diametrically opposed to Paul's prayer, that we may abound in biblical love, because self-sacrifice and self-esteem (or self-love) are opposites.

Don't misunderstand! To say that we should not build our children's self-esteem is not to say that we should be unloving toward them. In fact, we should esteem our children and others more highly than we do ourselves (Phil. 2:3-4). We should encourage them and give them proper affirmation, which is a part of biblical love. But the goal of such behavior is *not* to build their self-esteem, but rather to model Christ and encourage our kids to be like Him. If our children see us denying self to please our Lord, they will want to follow and serve Him by laying down their lives out of love for Him and for others. If our focus is to help our kids build their self-esteem, we're encouraging the inborn selfishness that dominates every fallen human heart.

Thus the heart of Paul's prayer is for us to grow in the supreme virtue of discerning love.

2. Biblical love results in godly living that gives glory to God.

Verses 10 & 11 are the result of verse 9 (“so that”). There are five aspects of godly living mentioned here:

A. Godly living involves proper priorities.

“... that you may approve the things that are excellent, ...” The NIV translates, “to discern what is best.” Moffatt paraphrases, “Enabling you to have a sense of what is vital.” Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments, “The difficulty in life is to know on what we ought to concentrate. The whole art of life, I sometimes think, is the art of knowing what to leave out, what to ignore, what to put on one side. How prone we are to dissipate our energies and to waste our time by forgetting what is vital and giving ourselves to second and third rate issues” (*The Life of Joy* [Baker], p. 54).

What is vital is that you focus your life on loving God and others based on true knowledge and discernment. If that is at the center of your life, everything else will fall into its proper place.

B. Godly living involves integrity.

“... in order to be sincere and blameless ....” These words do not imply perfection, which no one, including Paul, attains in this life (Phil. 3:13). Rather, the words mean to live with integrity. To be sincere means to be pure, unmixed, without hypocrisy. To be blameless means to walk without stumbling. Paul used the word “blameless” to describe his own conscience before God and men (Acts 24:16). Since God looks on the heart, to be sincere and blameless means to live openly before God, judging sin on the thought level. It means that you don’t live a double life, putting on a good front around the church folks, but living another way when you’re alone or with your family.

C. Godly living involves living in light of Christ’s coming.

“... for the day of Christ; ...” The Christian who is growing in discerning love is living in light of Christ’s soon coming, when we all must stand before Him. If you’re living for personal happiness or fulfillment in this life, you will live for self and will not live in love for God and others. But if you realize that today you could be

face to face with Christ, it motivates you to godly living, to self-sacrificing love.

D. Godly living involves bearing fruit through Jesus Christ.

"... having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, ..." The instant we trust in Christ as Savior, God imputes His righteousness to our account, so that we have right standing with Him. But the Christian life is a process of growing in righteous character and deeds. As the word "fruit" implies, this is a process, not something instantaneous. The word picture also implies that it is the life of Christ working in and through us that produces the fruit (John 15:1-6). As we grow in the true knowledge of God and in discernment through His Word, the fruit of the Spirit, whose first characteristic is love, is produced in us. We will become "zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14). The final result will be:

E. Godly living results in glory and praise to God.

"... to the glory and praise of God." As we abound in discerning love, which leads to godly character and good deeds, God will be exalted in and through us, so that both we and others will praise Him for His grace and power. The ultimate goal of the Christian life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. He is glorified (made to look good as He truly is) when His people abound in discerning love.

### Conclusion

Moffatt translates 1 Corinthians 14:1, "Make love your aim." Is your love for God and others abounding "still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment"? Is your growing love leading to godliness through proper priorities, integrity, living in light of Christ's coming, and bearing the fruit of righteousness, so that your life results in glory and praise to God? Let's all apply Paul's prayer first to ourselves, and then let's pray it for one another. If we grow in love rooted in true knowledge and discernment, we will avoid the winds of false doctrine that are blowing so many off course in our day.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why must love be rooted in truth? What happens when it's not? Why must truth be coupled with love?
2. Can we have true Christian unity at the expense of truth (John 17:14-21; Eph. 4:3-6, 13)?
3. Why is it essential to determine what love is from Scripture rather than from our cultural ideas of love?
4. How can we know if we love God (John 14:21, 23; 1 John 5:3)?
5. How can we know if we love others properly (1 Cor. 13:4-7; 1 John 3:16-18; 4:7-21)?

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