

BE DISCERNING**1 JOHN 2:18-27, 4:1-6**

When I was in the 5th grade, I got my first pair of glasses. I didn't know my vision was fuzzy until then. I genuinely thought no one else could read the blackboard from the back of the room either. The doctor explained I was nearsighted and needed corrective lenses so my eyes would focus properly. I can still remember how amazed I was when I put on those glasses for the first time. I could actually see individual blades of grass when before it was just a big, green smudge. I could see with a clarity that took my breath away. At first, I was embarrassed to wear my glasses. I was concerned my peers would make fun of me and call me Four Eyes. My eye doctor was a wise man. He told my parents not to force me to wear my glasses. He already knew something I would learn soon enough. Focused vision is better than fuzzy vision. Being able to see clearly is better than the silly taunts of children. It wasn't long before I wore my glasses all the time. Then I transitioned to contact lenses for decades. In the last couple of years, I've had to go back to glasses. Why? Same basic reason. As my eyes age, my doctor told me I would see better with glasses than contacts. Well, I want to see well.

Here's what I want you to think with me about today: how we see God, the world we live in, truth, and what matters in life are all matters of seeing. Not physical vision, of course. Instead, it's about spiritual vision or perception. And our spiritual vision – our perception of God, the world, truth, life, etc. – can be either focused or fuzzy. God sent His Son, Jesus, into this world to correct our fuzzy spiritual vision and enable us to focus clearly on who God is and what life is truly all about.

KISS: Keep It Simple, Saint. That's the title of a message series we're working through in the book of 1 John. By simple, I don't mean shallow, superficial, or even easy. Instead, following Jesus doesn't need to be complicated or confusing. It's simple and straightforward. John kept bringing up three tests or marks of spiritual authenticity for followers of Jesus. The first test was doctrinal accuracy. Get Jesus right – who He is and what He did. The second test was growth in a godly lifestyle. If you talk about Jesus on Sunday, walk like Jesus the rest of the week. God doesn't expect you to be perfect, but He does expect you to make progress. The third mark or test was loving God's people. God is love and people who belong to Jesus love God, love everyone else who loves Jesus, and even extend that love to those who don't love Jesus yet. Let's read the passages we want to drill into today. See if you can guess which of those three tests or marks John focused on. I think John was focusing on the first test – the mark of doctrinal accuracy particularly as it pertained to Jesus – who He is and what He did. He was encouraging the Jesus followers he knew and loved to be discerning. To be perceptive. To make sure their spiritual vision was focused and not fuzzy. It's a decision and a choice that still exists even today.

WHAT CAUSES MY SPIRITUAL VISION TO BE FUZZY?

The first answer to that question is obvious. My own sinfulness. The Bible makes it only too clear that every human being is born with fuzzy spiritual vision because of

something called sin. Sin has a way of making all of us nearsighted about God, the world, truth, and what matters in life.

A second answer is closely aligned with the first: spiritual deception. Have you ever wondered why some people can't ever understand or accept who Jesus is and what He did? Well, here's your ultimate answer. The Bible says, "Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God." (2 Cor. 4:4 NLT) The Bible says we live in a world that includes supernatural beings of immense power and influence: Satan - or the devil - and other demonic spirits. They were created by God, but are now in utter rebellion against Him. They're doing everything in their power to thwart the advance of God's Kingdom. They won't succeed, but they can and will do great damage until Jesus returns. One of Satan's most potent weapons is deception – getting people to believe lies about God, about Jesus, and about the truth. It's very important to be discerning.

That's what John was implying when he wrote, "Do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world." (1 Jo. 4:1, 4 NLT) In other words, there is the Holy Spirit, but there were back then - and there are still today - other spirit beings seeking to deceive human beings. Sometimes those demonic spirits will hide behind very dynamic, highly intellectual, incredibly charming, and super persuasive people whose words and influence can lead even genuine Jesus followers astray.

By the way, that was apparently how John understood Antichrist. John regarded Antichrist not so much as one really, bad dude coming in the distant future, but more as a group of false prophets present and active in his day. They'd once been active among Christians in his day, but now their hypocrisy had been revealed. For John, antichrist was demonstrated primarily in the rejection of key truths about Jesus promoted by these false teachers who were inspired by demonic beings. "But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here." (1 Jo 4:3 NLT) Antichrist, for John, was - and still is - a spirit of deception about who Jesus is and what Jesus did.

That gets us to a third cause of fuzzy vision about God, truth, and what matters in life. Being wrong about who Jesus and what He did. That was happening big time in John's day. A group of influential teachers – supposedly Christian – rejected the centrality of Jesus. Some denied Jesus was God in human flesh, as He claimed to be. Others argued Jesus was really just an ordinary man who at the time of His baptism became inhabited by the Spirit of God, but God's Spirit left him before the crucifixion. They believed for God to connect Himself with the material, physical world – including becoming a human being - would somehow diminish God's nature. Coming down to earth as a human was something God would not and could not allow Himself to do.

Getting Jesus wrong – who He is and what He did – is just as prevalent a reason for fuzzy vision today as it was back in John's day. We are besieged by all kinds of alternatives to the Christian faith today – other major, worldwide religions, cults that claim to be Christian but aren't, and philosophical outlooks that don't look religious on the surface, but are actually deeply religious all the same. What do they all have in common? Even though they might revere and respect Jesus to some extent; nevertheless, they deprive Jesus of His rightful place. They usually deny the fact He is both fully God and fully human. They refuse to acknowledge what He did on the cross and at the empty tomb as being absolutely essential for people to connect with God.

Three examples. Islam is the second largest worldwide religion after Christianity. What is its view of Jesus? Muslims revere Jesus as a great prophet, but they deny the fact He is God. Nor do they believe Jesus actually died on the cross. It's unthinkable to a Muslim that God would allow an anointed prophet like Jesus to be crucified. Islam gets Jesus wrong. There are some 6 to 7 million Mormons in the United States and about 14 million in the world. Mormonism is a cult, although many of its members sincerely believe it to be a form of Christianity. It is anything but Christian. If you want to know more about Mormonism, you should speak with Dave and Shirley Smith in our church because Dave was a Mormon for many years. Mormons believe Jesus' incarnation was the result of a physical relationship between God and Mary. They believe Jesus was a god, but they also believe any human being can become a god. Salvation is the result of our faith and good works which diminishes the place of Jesus' death and resurrection. Like Muslims, Mormons might revere Jesus, but they don't get Him or what He accomplished right. Mormonism gets Jesus wrong.

Two sociologists gave an interesting name to the actual "religion" of most Americans: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism or MTD. What on earth is that? It's not an organized religious group with a headquarters somewhere. It's more of a philosophy or a worldview. MTD believes there's a God who created the world, who watches over human beings, who wants us to be good and nice to each other, and who more or less exists to meet our needs. The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself. MTD also tries to revere Jesus as a good man, but diminishes Him at the same time. Whether He is fully God and fully human is irrelevant. His death and resurrection are also irrelevant, because people go to Heaven when they die because they've been good in this life not because of any connection to Jesus or what He did at the cross and empty tomb. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism gets Jesus wrong.

The "religion" of MTD puts great stock in sincerity. Have you heard well-meaning people say, "It doesn't really matter what you believe as long as you're sincere"? Sincerity is admirable, to be sure, but it doesn't make something true. If you believe a lie to be true, your sincerity doesn't transform that lie into truth. Let's say a nurse gives a hospital patient the wrong medication and he dies as a result. The nurse was completely sincere, but her sincerity didn't alter the outcome. Let's say a man wants to drive from Chicago to New York City. No amount of sincerity will get him to his destination, even if he sincerely believes he'll get there by traveling toward Los Angeles. Sincerity is great, but only when it's actually invested in what is true.

Vishal Mangalwadi is a Christian scholar from India. Back in 2011, he visited a Christian university in our country. He asked the students in two classes: "How many of you would still believe Christianity if you found out tomorrow that Christianity was not true. God never became a man; Jesus did not die for our sin; or, that He did not rise from the dead?" Half of the students raised their hands! Those sincere students had grown up in Christian homes, gone to church all their lives, and now they were attending a Christian university. They respected their elders who taught them that Christianity was all about faith with little concern about truth. Mangalwadi argues that Christianity has lost ground in America because 20th century evangelicals branded themselves as the *party of faith*. Secularism (think of the sciences, academia, the media, etc.) became the *party of truth*. Perhaps that's one reason why 70% of Christian young people give up meaningful involvement with the church when they grow up. Secularism acquired the "truth" brand by default because followers of Jesus began defining our mission as just cultivating *faith*, not also promoting knowledge of *truth*.

John believed and taught that being accurate about who Jesus is and what He did is all important. It's one of three marks or tests that a person, a teacher, or a religious leader is authentically a follower of Jesus and is communicating the truth. "But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God." (1 Jo. 4:3 NLT) Their spiritual vision is fuzzy. And those who buy into their inadequate understanding of Jesus are going to have fuzzy spiritual vision as well. So, follower of Jesus, be perceptive. Be discerning. So...

WHAT ENABLES MY SPIRITUAL VISION TO BE FOCUSED?

John might have answered that question like this, "So you must remain faithful to what you have been taught from the beginning. If you do, you will remain in fellowship with the Son and with the Father." (1 Jo. 2:24 NLT) Don't misunderstand what John said there. Just because some belief is really old and has been around for a long time doesn't make it true. Just because the very first Christians believed something to be true about Jesus doesn't make it true either. No, it's true because it always was and is the truth - the truth about God, Jesus, what matters most, and life itself. It's the truth that will never stop being true. What is that truth?

First, through Jesus, God shows us who He is. Many people picture God as distant and remote - too busy to be bothered with us. But Jesus made it clear that God wanted to have a relationship with us by sending Himself in His Son. The four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - give us the opportunity to see what God is really like. Jesus' words are God's words to us. Through the stories about Jesus we see what's important to God. We see God's heart for human beings. In Jesus, we see God's love and compassion. We see His willingness to forgive and embrace us despite our rebellion against Him. In Jesus, we see God took the initiative by going to all the trouble of stooping down and letting us know who He is. Hear what Jesus said about Himself, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!... Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I speak are not my own, but my Father who

lives in me does his work through me." (Jo. 14:9-10 NLT) When you grab ahold of the fundamental truth that Jesus, the human being, is also God, you realize God has revealed Himself to you! Through Jesus, God shows us who He is.

Second, through Jesus, God invites us into a relationship with Himself. Now, right there is a real problem, to be sure. The problem is that God is just. On the one hand, that's not a problem, because we want a God who upholds justice. We hear stories every day that anger and frustrate us. People taking advantage of other people. People dehumanizing fellow human beings. We call it righteous indignation. So wanting God to be just is a good thing. On the other hand, the problem is that if complete justice prevails in God's universe, eventually the sentence or the penalty will fall on you and me as well. When we're completely honest with ourselves, we know that our own sinful acts and attitudes have contributed to the problems we see in the world around us.

This is where Jesus comes in again. This is where God in human flesh and bone makes all the difference! As a human, Jesus was the only person to live a perfect life. And as God, Jesus was the only One qualified to bear the penalty of the sin of all humanity - the only One whose sacrifice was both complete and sufficient. On the cross, God's justice joined together with God's love. And in Jesus, a new invitation to have a restored relationship with God was offered to human beings. It has been made possible by the human being who was and is God: Jesus Christ. The Bible consistently teaches that Jesus alone makes an eternal relationship with God possible. You can't have God without Jesus. John put it like this in the passage we consider today. "Anyone who denies the Son doesn't have the Father, either. But anyone who acknowledges the Son has the Father also." (1 Jo. 2:23 NLT) It's only through Jesus we can begin a relationship with God and know Him as Father. Jesus was very clear about this issue. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (Jo. 14:6 NLT) Case closed.

The question that always comes up right here is the one about people of other faiths. Can't Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Mormons, or just good, decent people of no specific faith, but who still live good, moral lives have a relationship with God without Jesus? Not if what Jesus said is true. I realize this makes Jesus and the Christian faith appear to be exclusive, intolerant, and arrogant. But, actually, it just makes finding a relationship with God definite and simple, doesn't it? Keep it simple, saint. Believing God became a human person isn't an intolerant, exclusive claim intended to demean anyone. It's actually a generous and loving claim that holds out the best possible hope for humanity and the world. Don't be embarrassed by Jesus' exclusivity, follower of Jesus, embrace it! Through Jesus, God invites us into a relationship with Himself.

The late author and seminary professor, Dr. Robert Webber, was traveling on a plane from San Francisco to Los Angeles some years ago. He was sitting next to the window, reading a Christian book. The man next to him asked, "Are you a religious man?" "Well, yes," Webber said. "I am too," the other man responded. They began talking about religion. In the middle of the conversation, Webber asked, "Can you give me a one-liner that captures the essence of your faith?" The other man said, "Well, yes. We are all

part of the problem, and we are all part of the solution." They talked about his one-liner. After a while Webber said, "Would you like a one-liner that captures the Christian faith?" "Sure," the other man responded. "We are all part of the problem, but there is only one man who is the solution. His name is Jesus."

Here's a third aspect of this body of truth that will never stop being true. Through Jesus, God is making this world right again. God created this world to be a place where God's glory is put on display. Every now and then we get a glimpse of the beauty, goodness, and joy God always intended. But the truth is that none of us live very long before we learn - often very painfully - that all is not right. This world isn't always a place of beauty, goodness, and joy. Something is very wrong with this world. Accidents happen. Disease threatens our lives. Violence and oppression cause people to be displaced. Natural disasters strike leaving people lacking food, water, and shelter.

But Jesus entered this world. What did He do? He took broken things and began fixing them. Legs that couldn't walk, He restored. Eyes that were blind, He caused to see. Stomachs growling with hunger, He fed. What we discover is that through Jesus, God is working to bring together all the pieces of this broken world - to make this world right again. Through the work of Jesus, God is redeeming what He made - refusing to throw it away. Through Jesus, right now God is liberating the world from the hold of sin and death. And when Jesus rose from the dead, He had a restored physical body. God will do with the entire world what He did in Jesus at Easter. Jesus' physical resurrection assures us that a new creation is indeed underway. Through Jesus, everything gets brought back together. Through Jesus, God is restoring all of creation so that once again it will be a full and active demonstration of the glory of God! Through Jesus, God makes the world right again.

Dogs do some things better than humans. For one thing, most dogs have a far better sense of smell than we do. The sinuses of humans have about 6 million receptor cells that can sense odors afloat in the air. By contrast, the average beagle has more than 300 million receptor cells in its snout - that's 50 times more cells for smells. The dominant sense through which most humans perceive their world is their eyesight, but the dominant sense through which dogs perceive their world is through their nose. You and I can walk down the sidewalk and perhaps perceive a faint aroma of flowers upwind a few feet ahead. A dog walking the same sidewalk perceives not just the flowers but the traces of every dog or animal that has been in the area.

Just as dogs and humans have different levels of ability to perceive smells, people have differences in their ability to perceive things. Some people hear better than others. Some people have greater ability to perceive emotions in others. Some have greater ability intellectually to perceive ideas or concepts. Most important of all, some people have greater ability to perceive things spiritually. Not every follower of Jesus has the same ability to perceive spiritual truth. Why? What's the reason? It's because some have devoted themselves regularly to learning from the Bible, to prayer, and then applying it to their lives and their world. You and I can get and keep a spiritual vision that's focused and clear. We can increase our spiritual perception. Be discerning.