

GOD IS GREATER

by Ray C. Stedman

Some months ago I received a letter from a friend of mine, a man with whom I once shared wonderfully deep and precious moments of fellowship together. In my opinion he had evidenced in his life a keen insight into the understanding of Scripture. We enjoyed talking with each other about the things of God. He was trained in the same seminary that I attended. Yet this letter brought deep sorrow to my heart because in it he renounced his Christian faith and declared that he was forsaking both the Christian ministry and the Christian church, no longer having any confidence in its message or in its power but was himself abandoning all pretense to Christian testimony.

Now what had happened to a man like that? How could this occur with one who understood so thoroughly the essentials of the Christian message and had come into contact with a living Christ? The only explanation is that he had failed to heed the admonition we have been looking at in John's gospel. He failed to "test the spirits, whether they be of God or not," as John exhorts us in the opening verse of Chapter 4: "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits ... whether they be of God." Then he goes on, as we saw last time, to give us the test, the measure, by which we can tell truth from error in this mixed-up, confused, bewildered world in which we live. That test, as we saw, was two-fold:

It was, first, an acknowledgment of the historic incarnation of Jesus Christ -- the fact that the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the Holy One of God, described in glowing terms in the Old Testament, had actually come into human history, come as a man in the flesh; that, in a word, Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ. This is the test. But, further than being acknowledged as true, it must be confessed. John uses this word. He says, "he who confesses Jesus Christ," {1 Jn 4:2}. By that special word *confess* he means "he who lives on this principle," he who reflects it in his thinking and has committed himself to it and launched out upon it in his life, that is the one to listen to about the things of God. There is where religious truth comes from. Now, in the section we take now, beginning with Verse 4, John continues to unfold certain factors at work in this whole matter of truth versus error. How important these are today you well know who are aware of the confusion that exists everywhere.

Little children, you are of God, and have overcome them; for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world, therefore what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them. We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. {1 Jn 4:4-6 RSV}

You will note that each of these three verses begins with an emphatic pronoun. That is true both in the Greek and the English. There is first *you* -- "you are of God." Then, in Verse 5, "*they* are of the world"; and, in Verse 6, "*we* are of God." There are three distinct groups set forth here and they are not the same at all. The first group is addressed as "little children." These are the readers of this letter from the Apostle John and they are said to be "of God." Here obviously are Christians whom John declares have overcome the false teachers; that is, they have escaped their blandishments, and have not been deluded by their error. They have heard all the arguments of the false teachers and have successfully been enabled to see through them and to see the truth. So he says, "You are of God and you have overcome these false teachers."

Now, what is important in this verse is to note the ground of their victory. How was it that they overcame? If there is any way that you and I can escape the extreme pressures of theological error today, it will be by this same way. This way is indicated not so much by observing what he says as what he

does not say. These "little children" who are "of God" overcame the false teachers with all their subtle, pernicious error so beautifully and attractively presented, first, not because they had a superior intelligence. You'll notice that it says nothing about them being smarter than the teachers. Nor was it because they had been subjected to intense training in the cults. There is no word about that either. Nor is it that they had been supported and bulwarked by clever arguments with which they were able to answer the errors of the teachers. Nor was it their broad theological knowledge. There is none of this. John says, "you overcame them because greater is he that is in you than he who is in the world." In other words, it was not anything these Christians had that delivered them, it was the One who dwelt within them. It was the greatness of God that kept them straight. It was the fact that God was greater than the spirit that was at work behind the teachers of error. This is what will keep us straight today.

When you look around at the success of evil in history, and especially in our day, you can see that the enemy has great power. Think of our world and all that it is going through in terms of agony, struggle, evil, violence, and heartache, with confusion abounding on every side and no statesmen able to see any further than the end of his nose. All of them in one way or another, are publicly admitting that they don't know any answers -- they do not know the way out. Think of the despair that spreads like the tides of the sea across whole nations today. I learned this morning that one out of every four suicides in Sweden is that of a teenager, and the suicide rate is mounting everywhere today. Why this terrible wave of despair? When we think of the violence, the passion, the tears, and the death with which our world is characterized, we can see something of the greatness of the power of the enemy. No wonder someone has said:

"Our race had a hopeful beginning,
But man spoiled his chances by sinning,
We hope that the story will end in God's glory,
But at present the other side's winning."

It does look that way, doesn't it? But it isn't -- despite all the appearances. God is greater than the power of the enemy. In fact, it is almost ludicrous to put it that way. God is so incomparably greater than there is no contest whatsoever. This is where the eye of faith must always turn in hours of darkness, discomfort, or despair; turn to what the Scriptures reveal as the truth about God and how incomparably greater he is than anything that is present among men or behind men. Read of God's greatness in Isaiah, the 40th chapter. What an encouraging chapter that is. I turn to it frequently these days. The prophet cries out at the unbelief of the people of God in Verse 21,

**Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning? {Isa 40:21a RSV}**

"What is the matter with you people," he is saying. "Why all this gloom and despair? Why this mood of pessimism? Why this wringing of the hands and rending of your clothes? Haven't you been told what God is like?" He goes on:

**Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain;
and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. {Isa 40:21b-23 RSV}**

**To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high... {Isa 40:25-26a RSV}**

That is what people need to do in these days of darkness.

**Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?
He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name;
by the greatness of his might,
and because he is strong in power... {Isa 40:26 RSV}**

**Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hid from the Lord," {Isa 40:27a RSV}**

Imagine that! Do you think that God is unaware of what is happening in your life and the problems that you are going through? Why do you talk like this?

"and my right is disregarded by my God"? {Isa 40:27b RSV}

Would that we could get men to hear that today when so many are insisting upon their rights and saying that no one is standing up for them. The prophet says, "Imagine thinking that your right has been disregarded by God."

**Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary... {Isa 40:28a RSV}**

**He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength. {Isa 40:29 RSV}**

Do you remember what Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians as he came into Corinth, that beautiful city of culture and refinement with its love of great wisdom and the philosophers and the great thinkers of the golden age of Greece, how he forsook every approach on the basis of human wisdom and said, "I decided to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified," {1 Cor 2:2 KJV}. The reason he gave was that the weakness of God is stronger than men and the foolishness of God is wiser than men. That is, even when God acts in some way that seems to be utterly weak, it is still stronger than anything that man can do. When he says things that appear to be utter folly, foolishness in our eyes, remember that if you follow those, they will prove to be wiser than anything that man has ever said. That is the greatness of God. God is greater than all else. "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." I love that wonderful cry of triumph on the part of the Apostle Paul in Romans 11 after he concludes his great treatise on the providence of God and the free will of man with the cry,

**O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! [past finding out.]
"For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?"
"Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"
For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. {Rom 11:33-36 RSV}**

God is greater -- incomparably greater -- than the wisdom of the enemy. Now the point of all this is, as John brings out, that all this incomparable, superior wisdom is available to the humblest Christian believer, so there isn't a chance, not a chance, that he will be swept away by the silken errors of the day,

attractive and alluring as they may be, if he combines the two things together that John mentions here. These two factors guarantee deliverance. They are the relationship of being "of God" and of being "little children." You see, it is not by accident that John uses this title, "little children," for that is the name that indicates the trust -- the childlike trust of one who believes the Word of God. Now, you don't have to fully understand it; simply accept it, trust it, and act on it. You will discover that all the wisdom and greatness and superior intelligence of God is imparted in that simple word, and, though it may appear foolish to others, it is wiser than men. He who in childlike faith trusts the Word to guide him through life, acting upon it, regardless of how widespread are the opinions of men who speak contrary to it, will find that he will be safely kept through all entrapping errors. He can sing as we do sometimes sing together,

"Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath bro't me safe thus far
And grace will lead me home."

God is greater, and it is this simple trust in his wisdom that makes it possible for you to lay hold of all the greatness of God. Now it is right here where the subtle attack of the enemy occurs. Through the years I have watched students come here to Stanford University, San Jose State, Foothill College and other schools where they are often exposed to clever arguments to undermine Christian faith. This not only occurs in universities, but is everywhere today. The world, in its general outlook, is hostile to the faith of Christians. There is no question about that. But often in these places there is a very clever and subtle approach to unbelief. I have seen it happen many times that those who have been raised in godly homes, raised to believe the Scriptures, have entered college and have found their faith gradually and subtly undermined by the clever arguments of those whom they respect and honor as teachers, men of intelligence, men of perceptiveness and insight, and apparent understanding of the ways of life.

It always begins the same way. They swallow first the rather subtle line that it is necessary for each to think for himself, to judge everything by the light of whether it appears reasonable to him. There is never any examination of that basic premise, though what it is really saying is that the mind of man becomes the ultimate test, the ultimate authority of all life. It is necessary for man to reason and it is necessary for him to think for himself and to examine things. But we are creatures under God, and we never can examine accurately or rightly until we begin with the basic recognition that all of man's thinking, blinded and shadowed as it is with the confusion of sin, must be measured by the Word of God. There is the ultimate authority. There is the test. There is what can help us to know whether we are right or wrong, whether we are living according to reality or drifting off into the never-never-land of relativity and fantasy. That is the test. This is how the drift into error begins. They forget that the authority they are challenging is that of Jesus Christ himself, for the authority of the Scriptures is the authority of Christ. He himself accepted them. He said they were the Word of God. Everything in the book is wrapped up with the authority of the Lord Jesus himself, and that is ultimately where all Christian faith rests. We have committed ourselves to the fact that this one who appeared among us as a man in history knew more about life than anyone else that has ever lived. He understood it from the beginning to the end, and came down, as he said, from heaven, understanding the things of God and the deep things of men. That is why he did not need anyone to tell him what was in man because he knew men and he knew what was in their hearts. This is the one who solved the unsolvable problems of human life, who rose from the dead! Who ever has done that in human history, who has ever presented those kind of credentials to be believed? It all comes back to the authority of Jesus Christ.

Now you don't begin with the authority of Scripture, obviously not. It is wrong for Christians to get the idea that the first thing we have to convince people of in presenting the Christian faith is that they must accept the Bible as true. No one accepts the Bible on that basis. This is unintelligent and unreasonable.

We should never ask them to do this. What they are asked to accept is the living Christ, the Lord Jesus, to come into a personal relationship with him and then having come to know him, and having discovered in their own life that he is real, that he lives, that he delivers, that he changes, that he transforms, on that basis, on that unshakable experience which they themselves have encountered, confirming the objective testimony of the Scriptures, they are to accept the authority of the Word of God. That is quite different, isn't it? When they once come to Christ, then they are to accept the Word, and, if they trust it in simple, childlike faith, they will discover that it has a way of taking them safely past all the devious errors of men and all the clever stratagems of the enemy, into living life as God intended life to be lived.

Recently a number of us were having a conversation together, and, as so often seems to be happening these days, the topic turned to Bishop Pike. As we discussed him, and his popularity among people today, and the fact that he has said some rather startling things, one of the members of the group said a very significant thing. He said, "You know, if Bishop Pike would just admit that he isn't an authority in religious matters, if he would just acknowledge his own heart's need, I think he could learn a great deal because behind that facade is probably a very hungry heart."

Now that is exactly what John is saying. It is the attitude of being a little child that is necessary. That is the teachable attitude. We are to come to the Scriptures always and forever as little children, needing to be taught out of the wisdom and greatness and superior intelligence of God. One of the most helpful verses to me as a young Christian, which I pass on to any young Christians here is Proverbs 3:5-6.

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not to your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your path. {cf, Prov 3:5-6 KJV}**

What a guide through life that is. God is greater than the spirit of the world. Now look at the second verse, Verse 5:

They are of the world, therefore what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them. {1 Jn 4:5 RSV}

"They" here are the false teachers of all varieties, including those who rant and rave and those who speak in cultured tones and with apparent logic. They are "of the world." The one revealing thing about them is that they say what the world wants to hear; therefore, they are almost invariably popular. Popularity generally accompanies these teachers. They find an easy and quick popularity.

Have you noticed it? Let one of these theologians come out with some startling statement that denies some basic fundamental Christian truth and it is spread across the papers immediately. Soon they form a "school of thought" and this begins to spread and others jump on the bandwagon. The world listens to them. Why? Because they are saying what the world wants to hear. And what is that? Well, if you analyze what they are saying, you will find that running as an undercurrent through everything they say is a basic assumption of the greatness and glory of man. That is it. The world loves to hear man exalted: How smart we are. How mature we are. How we have "come of age" at last. How we are right on the verge of being able to manipulate every earthly power to our advantage. How clever we are at solving the problems of earth. That is said in the face of the most astounding and appalling chaos existing on every side and growing every moment. Isn't it amazing that man can have such intellectual pride in the face of such appalling failure? Yet that is what the world wants to hear and so the popularity of these false teachers is assured.

A few weeks' ago just such an incident occurred when this woman in Washington, D. C., who purports to be a prophet, announcing things that are going to happen, evidently gave some prediction about an

earthquake occurring on the west coast. One of my children came home from school and said that the children in school were troubled by this, terribly disturbed by it, and some of them were afraid the whole {San Francisco} Peninsula was about to sink into the Pacific Ocean. People were worried by this and frightened by it. Isn't it amazing that someone, speaking quite apart from the inspiration of the Word of God or the Spirit of God, should be so widely believed? But read a passage from Hosea or Daniel or Isaiah or one of the great prophets who accurately predicts what is coming in human history and people yawn and go to sleep.

Now popularity is not necessarily a mark of false prophets. God in his grace has sometimes allowed teachers of truth to be very popular; otherwise, how can you explain a man like Billy Graham? But the test is whether the message glorifies man or God. Now John concludes in Verse 6, "We are of God." Who does he mean? Here he is speaking of the apostles, of which he was one. "We apostles" he says, in contrast to you who are Christians, are "of God." We form a special band of authoritative apostles who were with the Lord Jesus and have been commissioned to the task of declaring authoritatively the full message of Christianity.

We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. {1 Jn 4:6a RSV}

John could say that the apostles were of God because he, with the other twelve, were one with Jesus Christ. They had entered into a union and a relationship to him that grew out of hearing his teachings. John, himself, you remember, describes this in his Gospel. He says this awareness came to them all rather gradually:

They watched him. They listened to him. They followed him. They saw the things that he did. They heard the things he said, and gradually there dawned on them, as they listened, an increasing awareness which John records in these words -- "We beheld his glory as of the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," {cf, John 1:14 RSV}. Then, as they watched him, their faith was weakened and shattered by the crucifixion, but on the morning of the resurrection they were convinced again, almost against their will; they could hardly believe this incredible thing that he who was dead was alive again. But they had to acknowledge it by the evidence their own senses gave them. Here was one who had broken through the bonds of death. They saw him, they handled him, they felt him, they touched him, they lived with him again for forty days and forty nights and they were convinced. Then, finally, on the day of Pentecost, all doubt was taken away forever when, in the courts of the temple, as the Lord Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them and they were commissioned to be the men to begin the task of heralding out this great message unto the far corners of the earth. That is why he says "we are of God"; therefore, those who are of God listen to us. Here is another test of truth and error. He says,

By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. {1 Jn 4:6b RSV}

Do men receive the apostolic witness, or do they think that to sit behind a desk in some American city removed by some five to eight thousand miles from the scene of these amazing events and by twenty centuries of history, somehow makes them know more than the apostles of the Lord Jesus? "No," John says, "we are of God and those who are of God listen to us."

Remember, that was one of the things which encouraged the Apostle Paul when he came into the Greek city of Corinth. He had encountered much opposition there. A rising tide of resistance was mounting against him. One night the Lord appeared to him when he was sorely tempted by discouragement and said to him, "Fear not Paul, for no man will set on thee to hurt thee, but I have yet many people in this city," {cf, Acts 18:9-10}. Now what did he mean? These "many people" were not Christians yet. They

were pagans. But they were "of God" in the sense that they were willing to listen. They were open to the Word of God. They were ready to hear what God had to say. So God said, "Paul, while you go about the city preaching the Word of God, don't worry. Out in that crowd, though you won't be able to tell them from any others, are some in whom my Spirit is working and they will hear what you have to say. Others will not hear, but those who hear will come to you." This is what Jesus meant when he said, "All that my Father has given me shall come unto me," {cf, John 6:38-40}. This is the sign then of truly open hearts. Do they hear the apostolic witness? Do they believe what the apostles have said?

May I add this note, however, to all this. This is the test of what to believe, not whom to befriend. Christians sometimes make the mistake of thinking that if someone doesn't give immediate response or receive the Word of God, they are to cut off any contact with them, commit them to Hades, and go their way. No, no! This has nothing to do with whether we befriend people or not. We need to get to know them and show them compassion and understanding. What John is writing about here is how to know whom to believe, or what to follow. This is the test: Does it acknowledge the historic person of Jesus Christ? Does it follow him, believe him? Does it accept the apostolic witness? This is the way that we shall know the difference between truth and error today.

Prayer

Our Father, how grateful we are for this wonderful word, this word of wisdom, magnified even above thy name. How grateful we are that you have given it to us at the cost of blood, and sweat and tears. The death of many who have supported it and befriended it has occurred in order that we might have this word. Lord, we pray that we may value it, read it, search it, seek its wisdom in every relationship of life, knowing that here are the answers, if we will but give ourselves to finding them. We pray that we might be found faithful servants, faithful students, workmen who need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. We ask in Thy name, Amen.

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