

### HISTORICAL LESSON: Acts 11:19-26

- 19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.
- 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.
- 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.
- 22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.
- 23 When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.
- 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.
- 25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,
- 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

### PSALM 98 (A psalm). *Christian Worship*, page 103

- 1 Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.
- 2 The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
- 3 He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.
- 4 Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music;
- 5 make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing,
- 6 with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—shout for joy before the LORD, the King.
- 7 Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.
- 8 Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy;
- 9 let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

### EPISTLE: 1 John 4:1-11

- 1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.
- 2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,
- 3 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.
- 4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

- 5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.
- 6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.
- 7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.
- 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.
- 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.
- 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.
- 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

**GOSPEL:** John 15:9-17

- 9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.
- 10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.
- 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.
- 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.
- 13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.
- 14 You are my friends if you do what I command.
- 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.
- 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.
- 17 This is my command: Love each other.”

Dearly Beloved:

I address you with the term “dearly beloved” because the Apostle John uses that term no less than 3 times in the 11 verses of our text this morning. The NIV, from which I read the text, uses “dear friends,” but the actual Greek work comes from the root “**agape**” (αγαπη). What John is vividly illustrating to his readers, and to us, is not only are we beloved, but we are unconditionally loved and our heavenly Father stops at nothing to love us! We are “agapied.” We are loved in spite of ourselves! **That is our Badge of Honor**—*that we have the Spirit of Truth and that We are Loved by God!*

The Apostle John—the apostle Jesus loved—has some very wise and important and valid words for us today. He urges us to carry and wear and live **our Badge of Honor**. You see false teaching was already creeping into the church in John’s day—even to point that the spirit of the antichrist was present! John urges his readers to test the spirits and prophets to see if they are from God. And he reminds his readers about love—God’s love for us, and how we show that love to others. Now think of the irony here—John, the very same disciple begging Jesus to rain down destruction on a town that rejected Jesus and his disciples now advocating love!

**Our Badge of Honor**, first of all, is based on **the Spirit of Truth**. These words, especially, have relevance today as many echo Pilate’s sentiment, “**What is truth?**” Truth today is relevant. We have euphemisms for sin: alternate lifestyles, a woman’s choice, actions that hurt no one, and others. But sometimes we can also hide behind our self-righteousness, can’t we? “Well, who do they think they are to get away with that?” So, how do we know “What is truth?”

St. John tells us: “**Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize 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.**”

John first tells us to test the spirits. In the Greek, the word used literally means “put to the test, examine, prove by testing.” It’s similar to when you buy a car—you read any literature on the car, you test drive it to see how it feels and if it suits your needs. This word in the Greek was often used to refer to the testing of oxen. What happens when you have oxen to pull a wagon or plow? You need two beasts that match each other stride for stride. They must have the same stamina. If they don’t match stride for stride, or one tires easily, you cannot plow in straight lines. Your furrows will be crooked. John says, “Test the prophets—are they step for step with the word of God?”

And what is the test of these prophets? “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.” Basically, the test boils down to “What do you think of Christ?” Is he both true man and true God? Then the prophet is from God. However, if the prophet acknowledges that Jesus is either only a man, or only God, or only a demi-god, then that prophet is not from God. Whoever does not acknowledge that Jesus is true God and true man has the spirit of antichrist—that is, he takes the place of Christ in the church! In fact, John goes on to say: “They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.”

Why would these false prophets be of the world and not of God? Because of the message they proclaim! They proclaim a humanistic message. This takes on many forms. One form is legalism. You must do this and that and live a certain way IF you are to be saved. Another form is abandoning the law. No doubt you’ve heard people say, “Well, we have to do the loving thing and ACCEPT people as they are.” And what are we to accept? Basically, it is an acceptance of sinful lifestyles without a call for repentance. In either case, the humanistic philosophy is this is what I can do or this is who I am.

Where do we usually find ourselves? Are we quickly judgmental on someone’s lifestyle and insist they “clean up their act” before we begin to think about treating them with Christian love? Or do we let others alone, knowing their sinful behavior is not only harmful, and damaging in this life, but also leads to eternal death? Do we sweep these things under the rug because we don’t want to rock the boat? You see, while the two approaches appear radically different, they nevertheless lead to the same, sad result—eternal damnation apart from a loving, heavenly Father who sent his Son to die for our sins and has paid for them all!

But John tells us that we have overcome the world! How have we overcome the world? I look at myself and tally up all the sins I know about—and I can’t even begin to imagine the sins I don’t know about! How can the apostle say that I have overcome the world?

We have overcome because through listening to the voice of God we realize that we are forgiven. We realize, as Paul said, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” God has worked to create and strengthen faith in our hearts and to lead us to discern the spirit of truth from the spirit of deceit

The word that St. John uses for “deceit” bears further study. Literally, the word used here means “wandering, roaming.” In other words, a spirit of deceit is a wandering spirit! I have spoken with many who don’t have the spirit of truth, or have been clouded by the spirit of deceit. If you’ve also spoken to such people, you’ll understand what St. John is saying here. When someone has their own idea or philosophy, or spiritual viewpoint, their arguments are full of holes. And when you expose the holes, the person often changes topics. For a vivid example, view the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. Whenever Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy in her life, she changed the subject. Adam and Eve, as well, “wandered” in blaming others for their sin of eating the forbidden fruit. Which **Badge of Honor** is yours—the spirit of truth or the spirit of wandering and deceit?

**Our Badge of Honor** is also a badge of love. We are **loved by God**! Can you just hear how Saint John expresses this repeatedly? Three times he addresses his readers as “**dearly beloved**.” We are showered with God’s love whether we want it or not! In verse four John uses the term “**children**.” This isn’t meant as an insult—rather, it illustrates our standing as members of God’s family, that He should call us His children!

The clincher comes when John explains how much God loved us: “**This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.**” Notice the repetition here? John impresses upon his readers, and to us here this morning, that God didn’t love us like we might like a plant or like our cars or homes. No! He loved us far more than that—he loved us so much he sent His Son to pay the price for our sins!

Which begs the question, “Why did Jesus have to die to pay for our sins?” Basically, because we couldn’t. We have all sinned in thought, word, and deed. Take just the first commandment—have you gone without worry in your life? Do you take each and every problem you have to God in prayer? Are there things you would rather do than study God’s word? Rarely can we get beyond the FIRST commandment without seeing our sinfulness—and there are nine more commandments after that! We don’t always love our neighbor as ourselves. We may not rob a bank at gunpoint, but are we always efficient with our employer’s time? Are we self-serving and seek sexual gratification without making a lifelong commitment to our partner? Do we abuse the bodies God gave us with drugs, alcohol, overeating, or eating the wrong foods? Or do we sit in despair, feeling God doesn’t love us, and no one else could care a hoot about us either? Yes, at times we dwell on our sinfulness and feel “God could not possibly love someone as sinful as I.

Which is why St. John dwells on this topic of God and his love. Because God DOES love each and every one of us! It wasn’t anything in us that made God love us. But it was the fact that God loves us that he didn’t let humanity drift into oblivion. Rather, he sent his Son into the world! He sent his Son to pay for our sins! He sent his Son to rescue us

John also stresses why God loved us. John says, “**not that we loved God.**” You see, by nature we are enemies of God! We all were born with the spirit of deceit, that spirit of wandering! God loves us even though there is no guarantee that we would love him back. How many of us are willing to love someone whom we feel will never return our love? How many of us would love that person so much we’d die for that person? Yet, that’s exactly what God did—he loved us so much that he died for us and paid for our many sins! We are “dearly beloved!” We are Children of God! That is our **Badge of Honor**!

Having been rescued, what is our response? Often, we read of heroic feats in the newspaper or *Reader’s Digest* magazine. Rarely does the hero seek a reward. In fact, many times the saved person has to track down his or her savior to thank them personally! But usually the person who is saved seeks to thank the savior and try, in some way, to repay that kindness. St. John has such a scenario in mind when he writes, “**Dear**

friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” Literally, St. John says we are “indebted” to love each other. But wait a minute—didn’t you just get done telling me that God has paid the full price for our sin? Don’t you normally say that we CANNOT assist in our salvation?

The answer to both questions is “Yes.” But what does John mean when he speaks of an indebtedness to “love each other?” Notice to WHOM we are indebted. We are not indebted to GOD, but to EACH OTHER! In other words, we are indebted to love each other as we care for each other’s souls. We are indebted to love each and point out sin and how it can separate us from God. We are indebted to love each other and pray for each other. We are indebted to forgive each other our sins. And we are indebted to share this Gospel message with others. That indebtedness may mean making room among our traditions for the traditions of others in the praise and worship of our God. This indebtedness may mean employing non-traditional, that is non-Lutheran-traditional, means of ministry to reach out to a dying world with the living Word. Our debt, therefore, is not to God but to each other! For we were just like the world in sin—but God has loved us abundantly and made us his dearly beloved children.

Wear your **Badge of Honor** with pride! This badge **reflects the Spirit of Truth**. This badge shows the world that **we are loved by God**—loved despite our sins! And this badge proclaims that God has redeemed the whole world, which God also loves and we are indebted to love. Dearly beloved let us love one another, even as God has loved us.

Amen.