

Bible Study:

The First Epistle of Saint John Chapter 4

Introduction

In this chapter of the first epistle of Saint John, let us read and discuss these three concepts: 1) Discernment, 2) Love, 3) the Fear of God.

John 4:1-6

1. Verses to explain:

a. Challenge in Verses 2-3

- i. Didn't the devils say, "You are the Christ, the Son of God"?
- ii. The key difference is "saying" versus "confessing" (*omologeï*)
- iii. Saint Antony instructs us:
 1. "The Lord Himself, even if the demons spoke the truth (for they said truly, *You are the Son of God*), still silenced them and prevented their speaking, so they would not sow their own evil with the truth, and in order that he might train us never to heed such as these, even if they seem to speak the truth. For it is not fitting for us, who possess the holy Scriptures and the freedom of the Savior, to be taught by the devil, the one who did not maintain his own rank, but has turned his mind in one direction after another."
- iv. The Lord says, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My father in heaven" (Matthew 7:15-22).

b. Verse 3: The Antichrist

- i. This is anyone who does not confess that the Son of God became Man while remaining God. The antichrist is already in the world, dwelling the minds of those who have rejected Christ either in word or in deed, to the point that there is no longer any hope for them (Bede).
- ii. He will also be a man who bears Satan inside him and who exalts himself above everything which is called God or which is worshiped. For that reason he will spurn idolatry and demand that people worship him instead (Theophylact).

c. Verse 4: Greater than he who is in the world

- i. This is great comfort for us to know that God’s power to save is always much greater than the devil’s power to do harm (Hilary of Arles)
- d. Verses 5 -6
 - i. Although we are in the world, we are not *of* the world as those who speak against love and against God.
 - ii. These are those who teach what the world wants to hear. They will find followers in them. Saint Antony once said, “A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, 'You are mad, you are not like us.'”
 - iii. The “We” in verse 6 refers to the apostles and their followers.
 - iv. Didymus the Blind comments on the word “hear”: If we take the word *hear* literally, it is clear that this cannot be true, since everybody can pick up the sounds of the words. It is therefore clear that the word means something more than that – it means that we should do what we hear. If someone does not know that he is supposed to act, he has not really heard.

2. Discernment

- a. Recommendation: Read the Life of Saint Antony and his discourse regarding how the devils take form when tempting the monks.
 - i. For instance, he says, “Frequently, without becoming visible, they pretend to chant with sacred songs, and they recite sayings from the Scriptures. And even when we are reading, they are able to say right away and repeatedly, as if in echo, the same things we have read.”
 - ii. The Lord, Himself, when He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness heard the devil quoting passages of Scripture in order to deceive Him. But the Lord exercised discernment
 - iii. It was the lack of discernment that led to the fall of Adam and Eve. Question: did they even have discernment since they did not have knowledge of good and evil? Yes, because God gave them a command to obey and they disregarded it.
- b. What about in our daily lives?
 - i. When is our discernment tested? How do we discern the good from the bad?
 - ii. How important is it to have this virtue of discernment?
- c. How does one achieve this virtue of discernment?
 - i. Read Conference Two (John Cassian)
 - 1. Through Humility – Abba Moses speaks here
 - a. Evidence of this humility: “when everything done or thought of is submitted to the scrutiny of our elders. This is to ensure that one trusts one’s own judgment in nothing, that one yields to their authority in everything,

that norms for good and bad must be established in accordance with what they have handed down.”

- b. What will we gain through discernment? “Not only will this procedure teach the young monk to march directly along the true road of discernment but it will actually keep him safe from all the deceits and snares of the enemy. Someone who lives not by his own decisions but by the example of the ancients will never be deceived.”
- c. These words are true in our actions, in our faith, in our way of thinking – we must always take the example of those who came before us: to learn from their righteousness and to avoid their mistakes.

ii. From the Life of Saint Antony

- 1. “But if some, being human, are frightened by the vision of the good spirits, those who appear remove their fear by means of love, as Gabriel did for Zacharias, and the angel who appeared in the holy sepulcher did for the women, and as did the one who said to the shepherds in the Gospel, *fear not*. The fear of those people does not stem from the soul’s cowardice, but from awareness of superior beings. Such, then, is the vision of the holy ones.”
- 2. “The assault and appearances of the evil ones, on the other hand, is something troubling, with crashing and noise and shouting – the sort of disturbance one might expect from tough youths and robbers. From this come immediately terror of soul, confusion and disorder of thoughts, dejection, enmity toward ascetics, listlessness, grief, memory of relatives, and fear of death; and finally there is craving for evil, contempt for virtue, and instability of character. When, therefore, you are frightened on seeing someone, if the fear is instantly removed, and its place is taken by unspeakable joy and cheerfulness and confidence and renewed strength, and calmness of thought, and by the other things I mentioned before, both bravery and love of God, be of good courage and say your prayers. For the joy and the stability of the soul attest to the holiness of the one who is in your presence. So when Abraham saw the Lord he rejoiced, and John jumped for joy at the voice of Mary the God-bearer. But if, when certain ones appear, a disturbance occurs and noise from outside, and an apparition of a worldly kind, and threat of death, and things I spoke of before, know that the visit is from the wicked.”

John 4:7-16

1. Verses 7-11
 - a. Love is not just a definition of who God is, but it is a description of His relationship to us as our Father.
 - b. How was this love manifested toward us? John 3:16; 1 John 4:9
 - i. Likewise, we are to give ourselves to Him and to one another
 - ii. “This is My commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:12-15).
2. Verses 12-16
 - a. How can we know that god lives in us?
 - i. If we love one another
 - ii. If we have been given His Spirit
 - iii. If we can confess Jesus is the Son of God
 - iv. If we abide in the love of God
3. Love
 - a. In these words we find the purpose of our entire life – to live in communion in God and the expression of that communion is love
 - b. The origin of love is God – God’s love comes first – it is shown in creation and salvation (Romans 5:8; Titus 3:4-7)
 - c. The love that is mentioned in this chapter is **agape** – the love as the action of perfect goodness for the sake of the other. God Himself has this love in that He does everything possible for our well-being. This is the spiritual and divine love that we must love with first of all.
 - d. Our love for God and each other is not simply based on emotions. Let us make sure that we are using the correct standard and guidelines when we speak of love. What does it really mean that our love burns for God? Is it purely an emotional state?

John 4:17-19

1. Love Overcomes Fear
 - a. What do you think of when you think of the Fear of God?
 - b. Are the concepts of love and fear incompatible?

2. Fear and Love move through stages (Dorotheos of Gaza)
 - a. One may form a desire for God because of the fear of condemnation
 - i. This is a starting point
 - ii. So he does not love what is good for its own sake, but out of the fear of torments
 - b. The other one forms a desire for God because he loves God himself, loves Him and knows what is acceptable to God
 - i. “Such a man fears and keeps to God’s will, not for fear of punishment, not to avoid condemnation, but, as we have said, because he has tasted the sweetness of being with God; he fears he may fall away from it; he fears to be turned away from it.” (Dorotheos of Gaza).

3. The concepts of Fear and Love are not incompatible, but the former precedes the latter and continues with it
 - a. Some people take the words of Saint John and say, “I don’t fear God at all, because I love him”
 - b. But this is a perfect love that can only be attained by fearing Him first.
 - i. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10) – when we fear the Lord, we learn to obey his commandments at first. Entering into His love is the goal.
 - ii. A wise person will start his journey toward the Lord from the beginning.
 - iii. If one commits sin or lusts for sin, the fear of God is not yet in his heart.
 - iv. Starting with fear of God, leads to repentance and removal from sin, and this brings us closer to God which helps us to achieve love.
 - v. This happens daily and does not happen in a moment, but takes much work.
 - c. The fear that Saint John may be speaking of involves the fear on the last day for the unrighteous, for Saint John continues, “because fear involves torment.”
 - d. The true test for our love is God is whether we obey His commandments or break them and sin
 - i. Saint John writes, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments” (1 John 5:3).
 - ii. And the Lord said, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me” (John 14:21) and “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (John 15:10).
 - e. So we cannot say that we love God while we do not follow His commandment and do not have fear in our hearts. This is the problem of misinterpreting the words, “Love God and do whatever you want”, because the love here that is

spoken of is the true and perfect love. Who of us has attained this perfect love and has ceased from his sin?

4. How do we attain this fear? Remember, we are not speaking of being afraid of God. It is about developing a fear of separating from Him, and at the same time trusting in His mercy and goodness that He will forgive our sins we have repented and confessed them.
 - a. Keeping in mind the consequences of sin and the day of punishment
 - b. Through Church worship and the Church rites which constantly remind us of the awe, reverence, and honor that is due to God
 - c. Daily repentance and living in humility
 - d. Showing reverence to our elders: if someone does not fear his father whom he sees, how can he fear God whom he does not see? To the one who respects his teacher, his father/mother, etc., he has already been accustomed to the fear of God. It is the same when we call upon the name of the Lord or when we ask for the prayers of the saints. We should address Jesus as Lord, and address the saints by their title.
 - e. Keeping the Lord and His holiness ever before us.
 - f. Every spiritual action that we do: making the sign of the cross, prayer, taking communion should all be done with respectful intent of the heart
 - g. Train yourself in secret, where no one sees you. If you fear God in private, you will for sure fear Him more before others. When one cleanses the inner heart, surely the outer self will appear more glorious to others, and they will glorify God as well.
 - h. Dorotheos of Gaza reminds us, in summary: “The Fathers tell us that a man gains possession of the fear of God by keeping the thought of death before his mind and remembering eternal punishment, by examining himself each evening about how he has passed the day and each morning about how he has passed the night; by never giving rein to his tongue and by keeping in close and continual touch with a man possessed of the fear of God, as his spiritual director.”

May the virtues of discernment, love, and the fear of God be a real presence in our lives and may we continue to abide in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Glory is due to our God unto the age of all ages. Amen.