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## **On Litmus Tests for Christian Discipleship**

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We live today with a lot of polarization, both inside of our churches and in society at large. There is something healthy in this, despite its bitter underside. Moral outrage and anger is in the end an indication of moral fervor. We still believe in things, in right and wrong. There's virtue in that.

But that being said, there is also something very unhealthy in our present situation, one within which sincere people can no longer have a civil and respectful conversation with each other over certain moral and religious issues because each side ultimately disrespects the other, convinced that the other has sold out on some issue that constitutes a litmus test for moral goodness. Inside the church and inside of our civic political processes, invariably, each side, liberal and conservative alike, has one issue that is its ultimate non-negotiable and which constitutes the litmus test by which to judge the moral and religious goodness of everyone else.

For some the single issue is a moral one (abortion, gay marriage, justice for a particular group), for others the single issue is an ecclesial practice (church attendance, membership in a particular denomination), and for others the single issue is dogmatic (women's ordination, the uncritical acceptance of scripture or of church authority, syncretism). But invariably one issue is singled out so as to become the basis for an ultimate discriminating judgment, a litmus test, as to whether someone else is worthy of religious and moral respect.

But is this legitimate? Can a single issue become a litmus test? What does Jesus say on this? What do the scriptures say on this? Can one single moral or religious issue be seen as constituting the very essence, the center, the non-negotiable heart of Christian discipleship?

In a sense, yes, though this must be carefully nuanced. As well, each New Testament writer formats this in a different way:

In the Gospel of Matthew the moral heart of discipleship is articulated by Jesus in what we call The Sermon on the Mount. At its center lies this challenge: Can you love an enemy? Can you truly forgive someone who has hurt you? Can you bless someone who has cursed you? Can you be good to those who have done you harm? Can you forgive a murderer?

This challenge is what sets Jesus' moral teaching apart from others and gives it its unique character - and its real teeth. This is meant to be the distinguishing mark of a follower of Jesus: He or she can love and forgive an enemy. If the Gospel of Matthew, or perhaps the New Testament as a whole, gives us a litmus test for discipleship, this might be its one-line formulation: Can you love and forgive an enemy?

Luke's Gospel makes essentially the same point in a different language. There Jesus challenges us to be compassionate as our heavenly Father is compassionate and then goes on to define that compassion as a love, like that of the Father of the Prodigal Son and Older Brother, that lets its light shine on the bad as well as the good, that reaches out and loves irrespective of what is deserving and what isn't. The litmus test here might be worded: Love each other beyond differences and beyond what you think is deserving of love. Do not love just your own kind or someone who reciprocates. Embrace in love as widely as God embraces in love.

The Epistles of Paul capture this in the distinction Paul makes between what he calls life in the flesh as opposed to what he calls life in the Spirit. The former, life in the flesh, is characterized by "lewd conduct, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, bickering, jealousy, outbursts of rage, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factionalism, envy, drunkenness, and orgies." When these exist in our lives, Paul cautions, we may not delude ourselves into thinking we are living inside of God's spirit.

Conversely, life in the Spirit, for Paul, is characterized by "charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, long-suffering, endurance, mildness, kindness, generosity, faith, and chastity." It is only when we these qualities are manifest in our lives that we may understand ourselves as walking in true discipleship.

For Paul, the litmus test is not one, single moral issue but rather a whole way of living that radiates more charity than selfishness, more joy than bitterness, more peace than factionalism, more patience and respect than negative judgment and gossip, more empathy than anger, and more willingness to sweat the blood of sacrifice than to give into the temptations of the moment.

This is not to suggest that particular moral, dogmatic, and ecclesial issues are not important; some of them are a matter of life and death. But Christian discipleship is not just about our actions, it's also about our hearts. The essence of Christian discipleship lies in putting on the heart of Christ. Proper morality, defense of truth, and life-giving church practices follow from that - and, when rooted in that, they become respectful, forgiving, and loving.

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