

# Loving Differences Aside

## Joel 2:18-29; Mt 9:27-38; 2<sup>nd</sup> John 1-13



I don't like everybody. I don't believe the way everybody else believes. I don't like the way others act. There are people I would rather not be around. There are those who make me uncomfortable. How are we supposed to get along? Maybe we could get along better if everyone were just like me. Then again, sometimes, I don't even get along with myself very well. Is it possible to set our differences aside and love each other in spite of them? Is it necessary?

Joel wrote of the dawning of a new day among the people. He spoke of *Yahweh* restoring the nation to the land in sovereignty and restoring their fortunes. He spoke words they longed to hear, words of God vindicating them from the control of foreign power powers and oppression. As they listened to his words, they heard what they wanted to hear. By choosing the parts of his message they wanted to hear, they distorted Joel's words, even as we are wont to do.

They heard the wonderful news of God's vindication. They heard of political independence. They heard of material blessing. They heard of spiritual blessing as well. They failed to grasp the fullness of Joel's news about how God would deal with the nation in a new manner. *Yahweh* would relate to them as individuals and as equals within the nation. They heard what they wanted to hear, for that is our way. We only listen in part, for we do not generally want to hear all of God's Word. We would much rather pick and choose the portions we wish to hear, believe, observe, and follow. They heard the words of God's promised material and spiritual blessing, but they failed to recognize God's will to bless the entire nation. Somehow that detail eluded them.

As they read the book of Joel, they longed for the blessings that *Yahweh* would pour out upon the nation, restoring their fortunes, feeding the people and their animals, and filling their barns to overflowing. They could not see that God's interest in the nation extended to the poor, the lame, the blind, the lepers, the outcasts, both clergy and laity, both men and women equally. Joel's words announced that *Yahweh's* spirit would be poured out and shared among the entire nation, from the least to the greatest.

Jesus healed and ministered to people no one wanted. He preached good news and God's love to people we would rather avoid. He heard the cries of the blind men who begged for relief and sight. They had heard the message of hope. He gave attention to the demon-possessed mute. He gave him a new lease on life—freedom from demonic oppression and speech. He healed. He cared for widows. He restored life to those reeling from death.

As Jesus granted life and a renewed beginning, he received severe criticism from some who did not or chose not to understand. The Pharisees characterized his ministry as being demonic in origin. They decreed that he must be using the power of the prince of demons in order to free those who were under demonic oppression. They could not fathom the depth of God's love and acceptance of those they themselves deemed unworthy of redemption. They saw only what they wanted to see.

The good news that Jesus preached was not good news to them. These Pharisees did not want God to accept the outcasts. They did not rejoice with Jesus' preaching deliverance to the poor, needy, oppressed, and infirm. To protect their own interests, they challenged grace by proclaiming it to be demonic rather than divine. They could not fathom that those they despised might find God granting them love, acceptance, forgiveness, and freedom. They could not accept all, and they did not want God to accept those they would rather avoid. It made them too uncomfortable.

Jesus' ministry was an affront to the privileged. Rather than limit himself to the official structures of Judaism and present his gospel to the religious elite, he chose to go through the countryside. He spent his time with those who had little recourse in religious society. He preached to the powerless and granted them access to God's grace, acceptance, and love. In contrast to words of condemnation from the Pharisees, Jesus proclaimed the need for more workers who would go into the fields proclaiming God's compassion—grace available to all.

John wrote a second letter, speaking again of love. God's love was his central theme and the basis for understanding the essence of the gospel. He spoke of the truth as abiding within the believer. He reminded the believers of the truth in which we are to live. He linked truth as a way of life with love. In John's words, living this truth demands living love.

Love was the central commandment as seen in John's first letter. In this second epistle, he brings love once again to the forefront. John joins the message of Jesus' proclamation to living love in the manner of this same Jesus. If it is true that Jesus came in the flesh—an answer to Gnostics in that day—it is also true that the incarnation was an expression of God's love. We have no right to claim to follow the teachings of Christ Jesus if we do not live in accordance with His example.

Jesus cared for all. Jesus loved all. Jesus expressed grace, acceptance, and care for the whole of the people. He granted forgiveness, mercy, love, grace, healing, and blessing to women, men, children, aged, blind, poor, lame, rich, powerful, and powerless. He called as disciples men who were of little account. He called women to sit at His feet in equal status. He preached in the synagogues, and he preached at the well in Sychar.

Jesus did not make distinction between those who were or were not worthy of the gospel. His only distinction was between those who would and would not accept it. Accepting the gospel to Jesus meant accepting those who society deemed unworthy. It meant loving in the same way that Jesus loved. It meant communicating God's grace as available to all without restriction. We might say it meant accepting the full implication of Joel's message—the Breath of *Yahweh* poured out upon the entire people without distinction.

Can we allow God to love people through us, even those for who we don't particularly care? Is it possible to set love aside our differences in order to allow God's grace to flow through us? Can we accept only part of the gospel of grace? Can we accept the blessings for ourselves without extending grace to others? Jesus reminded us that the laborers are few. The gospel requires that we accept and love all. Shall we labor for Him, or will we toil for personal benefit alone? If we accept the gospel, we must love our differences aside. Are we up to the challenge and risk?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*