

## Perspective Digest

---

Manuscript 1299

---

### Do They Know Us By Our Love?

John Ortberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd>

---

# DO THEY KNOW US BY OUR LOVE?

---

---

*The first casualty of the culture  
wars is not truth*

**I**n the culture wars of the first century, a group of activists came down on the right side of all the values questions. They rejected relativism and secularism. They were unwavering adherents of ethical absolutism. They were committed to the Judaeo-Christian values of monogamy in marriage and chastity outside it. They promoted monotheism against polytheistic Roman paganism. Clearly, the Pharisees were considered the Religious Right of Israel.

But it is interesting that the peo-

ple who held the “right” values were the ones least responsive to Jesus’ message and most likely to receive His reprimands. His message was received with the greatest eagerness by those who came down on the wrong side of all the values issues—the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the

---

\* *John Ortberg is teaching pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, near Chicago, Illinois. This opinion piece appeared in Christianity Today, May 19, 1997, and is reprinted with the permission of the author.*

*What if it is at least as important to love as to be right? What if Jesus really meant it when He said the heart of the law is to love God with your entire being and to love your neighbor as yourself?*

---

---

religious half-breeds.

To be sure, Jesus frequently occupied the Pharisees' circles as a dinner guest and intellectual companion, and there were even those within the group who embraced Him. Nonetheless, most Pharisees could not accept Jesus' radical claims and actions in light of their reading of the Holy Scriptures.

The ironic result of their "rightness" in belief and practice was that they became unable to love—did not want the sick healed on the Sabbath, did not want an adulterous woman to be forgiven, did not want sinners to share fellowship with the righteous. They came to see people they were called to love as "the enemy."

But they were not the only ones. The Inquisition, the Crusades, slavery—all these were entered into by people who believed in ethical absolutism and even defended their actions with the Bible—a common temptation for all who take faith seriously.

I regularly get fund-raising letters from Christian organizations that paint society in conspiratorial "us" verses "them" colors. Although I

usually agree with their moral positions, I rarely sense from them a caveat—let alone a consistent tone—acknowledging that love must be the ultimate aim even in disagreement.

It is a dangerous thing on questions of truth and significance to be wrong. But there may be a more dangerous thing: being right and knowing it.

Dallas Willard said once that it is very hard to be right and not hurt anybody with it. Look at schoolchildren—their pleasure in being right is boosted by knowing somebody else is wrong. Indeed, if nobody were wrong, being right would not be so special.

It is possible to be so caught up in the joy of being right, in the thrilling sense of being mostly superior to those who are "not right," that you become more wrong than your most degraded opponent. This "elitist elation" was why certain Pharisees—who were so careful not to commit adultery or steal or murder—were so deeply offended when Jesus said they were further from the kingdom of God than, say, Hugh Hefner or

Madonna.

Occasionally those on the front lines of the culture wars will acknowledge they could be more loving. Usually, however, the unspoken subtext reads: "The main thing is, I'm on the right side."

But what if it is at least as important to love as to be right? What if Jesus really meant it when He said the heart of the law is to love God with your entire being and to love your neighbor as yourself? What if Paul really meant it when he said that even if he had all knowledge, even if he got everything right, he was nothing if he didn't have love?

An old saying suggests that the first casualty of war is truth. Not true. The first casualty of war is love. And so it is in emotion-charged culture wars.

The primary task of the church is not to make a powerful apologetic for Christian values in society. It is to participate in, and witness to, the gospel. And the gospel Jesus proclaimed is an invitation to life in the presence and under the reign of God. "The time has come," He said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15, NIV).

Although the cultural warriors who opposed Jesus saw themselves as the defenders of values, Jesus' charge was that their list of values was arbitrary and lacking. They valued, for instance, a rigid adherence

to circumcision over the gracious inclusion of Gentiles. They tended to emphasize not those values that were most important, but those values that most readily distinguished them from their opponents.

This tendency is, I believe, a failing among many who debate cultural values. In the church where I grew up, for example, I heard many messages on the family and sexual purity. Yet I don't remember hearing a single one on racism or the civil-rights movement that was having an impact on the society of that day. Were those issues less important?

#### Traditional Values: A Caution

One phrase often used in the culture wars is *traditional values*. It conveys our deep concern that classic moral values such as marital commitment, stability of the home, and common human courtesies are rapidly eroding. These concerns need to be articulated carefully and thoughtfully, but when we call for a return to "traditional values," we must ask to what tradition we want to return.

I have never heard an African-American Christian use this phrase—and for good reason. The "traditions" of the mid-20th century included Jim Crow-style segregation and the denial, based on race, of equal access to housing and education. As a young man, my own grandfather had among his jobs the task of telling any persons of color who came through town that

they were not welcome to spend the night there.

Thankfully, part of being a Christian, and in particular, a Protestant, is the conviction that all traditions constantly need reform. The gospel is about eschatology, not nostalgia. The values to which we are called are not the values of any tradition, but the eternal values taught and lived by Jesus and expressed authoritatively in the Bible. These stand over and above every party platform and political agenda.

I am not advocating silence or neutrality on the controversial issues of today. But I do fear that with the current culture wars comes the devaluing of one of the church's primary tasks: discipleship. The reduc-

tion of Christianity to an ideology allows people to evade the task of true discipleship. It does not come through holding a certain set of values but by living a certain kind of life. It is far easier to promote values than to live them.

"All men will know that you are My disciples," Jesus said, not "if you promote My agenda" but "if you love one another." A watching world will be persuaded not when our values are promoted but when they are incarnated.

As the wars rage on and the church enters the fray, may we remember that Christ's call is not an invitation to be on the right side; it is an invitation to become the right person. □

## A M A T T E R O F T H E H E A R T

**I**f love is the soul of Christian existence, it must at the heart of every other Christian virtue. Thus, for example, justice without love is legalism; faith without love is ideology; hope without love is self-centeredness; forgiveness without love is self-abasement; fortitude without love is recklessness; generosity without love is extravagance; care without love is mere duty; fidelity without love is servitude Every virtue is an expression of love. No virtue is really a virtue unless it is permeated, or informed, by love (1 Cor. 13).—Richard P. McBrien, *Christianity Today* (January 8, 1996), p. 53.