

1st John Series

Chapter 4

Last time we closed chapter 3 with John stating that the Spirit of God resides in any true child of God. Paul said the same thing: "But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him [and is not a child of God]" (Ro. 8:9).

Since John's first letter is all about knowing for certain various spiritual truths like how to know you're truly saved, how to know you're walking in the light, how to know you're walking with Jesus, it's no surprise that chapter 4 opens with an exhortation to walk in discernment:

4:1 "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

He has already told us in 2:27, "But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But his anointing teaches you about everything..."

So the Spirit of God living inside every believer helps us to discern truth from error, what is from God and what is not from God.

"Do not believe" is in the imperative tense, meaning it is a command. STOP believing every spirit is another possible translation.

More than one kind of spirit sought to control or at least influence the minds and hearts of Christians. The "spirits" John mentions refer to a person or persons dominated or influenced by a demonic spirit or spirits.

These wrong spirits operating in others seek to control, deceive or influence for the purpose of power and control. Some examples or types of these demonic forces are spirits of religiosity, spirits of lying, of accusation, of deception, of pride, of lust, of greed, or depressing spirits [Rom. 8:38; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15; Heb. 1:4, 14].

John is warning believers against giving ear to people that are energized, not by the Holy Spirit, but by a demonic, false spirit. Paul the Apostle warned that many believers would fall prey to this very thing in the last days.

"Now the Holy Spirit tells us clearly that in the last times some will turn away from the true faith; they will follow deceptive spirits and teachings that come from demons" (1 Tim 4:1).

So John says, "Test the spirits" that are speaking through people you're listening to. Look beyond the person, the charisma, their speaking ability, who they claim to be representing, and test the spirit coming through them. Is it the Holy Spirit? Is it sound doctrine? Is it from God? Or is it false, deceptive, and coming from a false spirit?

So...How do we test the spirit?

Not necessarily by our feelings, although the Holy Spirit will often give us a check about someone. But that's not foolproof. If it were foolproof, no one would ever get deceived!

The best way to test a spirit is to hold their words up to the Word of God. Is what they're saying or how they're living Biblical? Does the Bible amen what they're claiming to be true?

But of course, if you don't know the Bible you will never be able to obey this verse. As Jesus in the wilderness held every one of Satan's words up to the Scriptures, and thereby avoided the devil's deceptions, so must we!

Then John tells us another way to know if a spirit speaking through someone is of God:

4:2-3 "By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world."

Now, keep in mind that John was dealing with a false teaching prominent in his day called Gnosticism, which taught that Jesus had NOT come in the flesh. This, of course, destroyed the truth of the gospel that proclaims God's love was revealed by sending His "only begotten Son" into the world.

So John is informing the believers of his day that if they ask a Gnostic whether Jesus came in the flesh they would say no, thus revealing they were false prophets.

But on the flip side, I can tell you that many false teachers in our day will quickly say that Jesus came in the flesh, because their deception is not of the Gnostic strain.

They may be teaching a form of Christianity that is not Biblical. Their message may focus inordinately on money, or sexual license, or that some of the things God condemns aren't really sinful. Or they misrepresent true Christian living by totally avoiding topics like discipleship, the cost of following Jesus, crucifying your flesh, hardship, persecution, and so on.

So again, the only way to "try the spirits" is to hold their teaching up to the Word of God. If it's sound doctrine you will know it by the Word of God. If it's not sound, the Bible will not support their message. Bottom line: KNOW THE WORD OF GOD LIKE THE BACK OF YOUR HAND!

Next, John tells us another way to mark those preaching a false message, beginning with a word of encouragement:

4:4-6 "You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."

The Spirit of God living in you is greater than any false spirit trying to lure you from Christ!

5 "They are of the world. Therefore they speak *as* of the world, and the world hears them. 6 We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

People who are energized by a false, deceptive spirit are of and from the world. They are not of or from God. And because they are of the world, the world hears and receives their message!

This is why Jesus warned, "Woe *to you* when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way" (Luke 6:26).

The Living Bible puts it this way: "And what sadness is ahead for those praised by the crowds—for *false* prophets have *always* been praised."

When I see someone claiming to be a Christian preacher or teacher being celebrated and received by the world, I always wonder about the content of their message. Because Jesus said in another place,

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18-19).

So John says that, not only will the true believer reject false teachers, but false teachers will reject true believers!

John spends the rest of chapter 4 on his favorite topic—loving one another. He first deals with *knowing God through love*:

4:7-11 “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

If we love one another, it is a mark of true salvation. You are surely “born of God and know God” if you walk in love. Conversely, John contends that if you have no love for others, you don’t know God as you ought.

The idea is this: You might know other things about God—His holiness, righteousness, judgment, sovereignty, but you lack the knowledge of God’s love. You haven’t experienced His love.

Many people know what this is like. You may have been raised in a very strict religious home of rules and regulations. You know what God requires with things like clean living, obedience to parents, etc. But you never have experienced the beauty of God’s mercy and love.

Hence, you can't give what you don't have! The more we learn of God, the more we will become like Him.

Next, John will talk about *seeing God through love*:

4:12-16 "No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him."

God is invisible. Paul wrote, "Christ is the visible image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). Jesus said, "God is Spirit" (John 4:24). But though He is invisible, we know Him through His love. The mark and evidence of His Presence is His love within us, and our love toward others.

This is how we know we abide in Him, because He has given us His Spirit, and His Spirit pours out His love in us. Paul wrote, "...the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Ro. 5:5).

"We have come to know [by personal observation and experience], and have believed [with deep, consistent faith] the love which God

has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides *continually* in him." (vs.16).

So though God is invisible, we see Him and know Him through the love He has poured out on us. Jesus said, "For God *so loved* the world He gave His only begotten Son." God's act of sending Jesus to die for us was an act of pure love from start to finish!

So we know God through love, we see God through love, and third, John talks about the *consummation of love*:

4:17-19 "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. 19 We love Him because He first loved us."

Once we experience God's love through Jesus Christ, the fear of coming judgment for sin is removed from us. We "have boldness in the day of judgment." God's love in Jesus Christ assures us that we have passed from death to life, and will no longer face judgment for our sins!

John says "There is no fear in love," but God's "perfect love casts out fear, because fear (of judgment) involves torment."

The book of Hebrews says that Jesus sets free "those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (2:15). Why were

they afraid of dying? Because of their guilt over sin and it's eternal consequences. But God's love removed all that through Jesus Christ! And John reminds us who made the first overture in our relationship with God through Christ: "We love Him because He FIRST loved us!"

Finally, John closes out chapter 4 by talking about *obedience by love*:

4:20-21 "If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? 21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also."

It is a commandment, not a suggestion, that we walk in love. Jesus gave only one commandment to His followers. "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Moses gave 10 commandments, Jesus gave only one. John says this is love's obedience—that we walk in love toward the brethren.

