

## Week 7 – 1 John 3:19 – 4:6

### Know the Truth, Test the Spirits

***“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (1 John 4:1, ESV)***

Right now, you may wonder where you stand. None of us exhibits continual self-sacrificial love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. All of us have moments when we mistreat the brethren by our actions – neglecting them in time of need, lashing out at them with our words, or failing to minister to them as fellow members of the body. We may not be shedding blood like Cain did to Abel, but we frequently fail to love one another as Christ loved us. This is why John provides these important words of encouragement. Genuine believers who waffle between Cain and Christ need to remember that they’re not made righteous by their works, but by faith in the name of the Son of God.

- **1 John 3:19-20** – *“By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.”*

What shall we know? We must have the knowledge described in the preceding passages, summed up in their demonstration of authentic love for the brethren: *“Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18)*. In fact, this love for the brethren has been John's major focus in *1 John 3:11-18*, beginning with the words, *“We should love one another” (1 John 3:11)*. We show our love by our actions!

Being human and thus prone to sin, Christians experience doubt regarding their relationship with God and others. Although there are many causes for it, there is only one answer to rectify this problem: knowledge of the Word. The Christian must simply confront themselves with what they know to be true concerning God and God's work in their life.

The topic of this paragraph is confidence or assurance. John is not the only New Testament writer that offers this encouragement.

*“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6, ESV)*

*“For I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.” (2 Timothy 1:12b, ESV)*

This is not something we can conjure up on our own (*John 5:5*). It comes from God.

*“Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:5, ESV)*

It is only when we cease trying to overcome sin by ourselves that we come to the beginning of God. Remember that God has granted you everything necessary for life and godliness!

- **1 John 3:21-22** – *“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”*

Doubt ceases when believers are walking in faithfulness and obedience. The heart does not condemn, so insecurity and fear give way to confidence before God. Such assurance causes believers to enter God's presence with certainty (*Hebrews 10:19*). Whatever they ask in prayer, they will receive from Him. This is the opposite attitude to the story of Ester's entering the presence of King Ahasuerus (*Ester 4:16*).

Our confidence in Christ does not make us lazy, negligent, or careless. To the contrary, it awakens us, urges us on, and makes us active in living righteous lives and doing good.

This does not imply a claim to sinlessness, nor an insensibility to the heinousness of sin. The action of a living faith keeps a real sense of fellowship with God, with confidence and peace, not anxious resignation, or avoidance.

Notice the link between confidence and the power in prayer. When we have endeavored with all our heart to love the Lord and one another, and to act righteously in all things, we have a confidence which enables us to speak with God as a friend ([John 15:14](#), [Exodus 33:11a](#), [James 2:23](#)). God loves this kind of confidence and He listens to those who possess it.

Obedience is the indispensable condition, not the meritorious cause of answered prayer. The basis for answered prayer is not blind obedience, but a desire to please God with dedicated love. Such people have learned to bring their minds into conformity with God's will.

Jesus makes a similar promise to His disciples, declaring:

*"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."* ([John 15:7](#))

Because our will is in harmony with God's, He answers our prayers. The evidence of this is that we *"keep his commandments and do what pleases him."* Our actions prove that God's will is our will and our will does not change when we pray. Our prayers are nothing other than echoes of God's own voice.

- **1 John 3:23** – *"And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us."*

What we believe affects how we behave. How we behave shows what we believe. If we believe, we will love. Conduct shows creed.

The Name Jesus emphasizes His humanity, His earthly ministry, and His divinity. To believe in Jesus' Name is to receive Him as Savior. John wrote:

*"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."* ([John 1:12](#), ESV)

This verse is the answer to those who would argue from the preceding verses. It does not much matter what we believe; all that is required of us is to do what is right.

John moves from belief (**faith**) to **love**. These two concepts are closely linked. In his Gospel, John reveals that Jesus repeatedly gave the command to love one another ([John 13:34](#); [15:12](#), [17](#)). Believing in Jesus Christ means obedience to his command to love one another.

- **1 John 3:24** – *"Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us."*

Obedience facilitates abiding **in** God the Father, but we are able to be obedient (keep His commandments) because He abides in us. God indwells our mortal bodies and continually gives us the supernatural desire and power to walk in a manner worthy of and pleasing to our Father in Heaven ([Philippians 2:13](#)). Love is evidence that we are in God and God is in us ([John 14:23](#); [15:10](#)).

The only way for saved sinners to keep His commandments is by learning to daily lean on God's supernatural enablement provided by His indwelling Spirit. We need to learn to yield our will to His will, confess ([Proverbs 28:13](#)) any known sins that might quench Him ([Psalm 139:23,24](#), [Ephesians 4:30](#)), and then rely entirely on the Holy Spirit, who will continually energize us giving us the desire and the power to keep God's commandments ([Philippians 2:13](#)).

- **1 John 4:1** – *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”*

The mention of the Holy Spirit in the previous verse ([1 John 3:24](#)) prompts John to warn his readers that other spirits (demonic spirits) exist who produce false prophets and false teachers to propagate their false doctrine.

He has stated there are two spirits in the world and now sets these in sharp contrast. One is the Holy Spirit, who abides in the believer, as mentioned in [1 John 3:24](#). The other is the spirit of the antichrist, which is in the world ([1 John 2:18-27](#)). The one is the Spirit of Truth, the other is the spirit of error.

*“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.”* ([1 Timothy 4:1-2](#), ESV).

Note that John is not referring to demon possession but to men who promoted spiritual error under the guidance of the unholy spirits.

Christians are to have a healthy skepticism regarding any teaching. Some among John's congregations were too open-minded to anyone claiming a new teaching regarding the faith. Christians are to be like the Bereans who, as students of the Word, examined the Scriptures to determine truth and error ([Acts 17:10-11](#)).

As it was in John's day and as it is in any other day, the goal of false prophets is deception. The best "antidote" for the lies and errors they propagate is a sure knowledge of the truth. John is saying, Do not gullibly buy into their lies, but test them with the acid test of the next two verses: [1 John 4:2-3](#).

- **1 John 4:2-3** – *“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”*

This section points to the supernatural character of this conflict as ultimately involving “the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of error.” It sets forth the crucial importance of the proclamation of a sound Christology for assurance and victory in the Christian community. ([1 John 4:1-6](#))

Some refuse to accept the biblical doctrine that Jesus Christ always has been, is, and will be the Son of God; that he came from heaven to redeem his people; that he became human yet remained divine; that he physically rose from the dead and ascended in his glorified body to heaven; and that he will return at God's appointed day in the same body in which he ascended. If you compare the teaching of these beliefs with God's Word, you notice their opinions are based on human philosophy and not on Scripture. Ask them what they think of the Christ, then go to your Bible and study the teachings of Scripture and answer Jesus' question: *“But who do you say I am?”* ([Matthew 16:15](#), ESV).

John repeatedly emphasized the deity of Christ and taught this truth with vast implications. No one can honor the Father without honoring the Son ([John 5:23](#)) because they share the same divine nature ([John 14:9](#)). To be saved, one must believe Jesus is the eternal deity, the second person of the Godhead who became a man. He is not merely a created being (contrary to what ancient false teachers taught and the modern-day sects teach). Mere intellectual assent to these truths saves no one ([James 2:19](#)); to be saved, one must also acknowledge Jesus as Lord ([Romans 10:9-10](#)).

A false teacher may be gentle and loving. He may speak prophecies that come true. He may even perform miracles or cast out demons or speak in tongues ([Exodus 7:11](#), [Deuteronomy](#)

[13:1-3](#), [Matthew 7:22-23](#)). But the question is, does this teacher lead people to follow a false god?

This conflict between the “Spirit of God” and “the spirit of the antichrist” forms the final aspect of the conflicts that mark the Christian life. John has already dealt with the conflict between truth and falsehood ([2:18–28](#)); the conflict between the children of God and the children of the Devil ([2:29–3:12](#)); and the conflict between love and hatred ([3:13–24](#)).

- **1 John 4:4** – *“Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”*

Christianity is not just a matter of subscribing to certain creeds or correct doctrines, although that is essential. It is a matter of being born of God so that you receive a new life from Him and become His child. Without the new birth, a person is incapable of understanding or obeying God’s truth. Christian believers are not only special people, born of God and called “children of God”; they are also different from those people who belong to the world.

By contrast, the false teachers and those who follow them are “from the world.”

Jesus said to the unbelieving Jews:

*“Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear My word... Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”* ([John 8:43, 47](#), ESV)

This verse says nothing about them being smarter than the teachers. Clever arguments had not supported and protected them from the errors of the teachers. There is no word about them being subjected to intense training in the cults. Their theological knowledge was not broad. They had none of this. John says they overcame the false teachers because, *“He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”* It was not anything these Christians had that delivered them. It was the One who dwelt within them. It was the fact that God was greater than the spirit that was at work behind the teachers of error. This will keep us straight today.

- **1 John 4:5** – *“They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.”*

In [1 John 4:3](#), John has identified the anti-Christian spirits negatively – as being “*not from God*.” Their human agents are now identified as being “*from the world*,” revealing their essential orientation and character. In relation to the Church of God, they reflect the distinctly negative reaction of the Christ-rejecting world.

The world of men is in rebellion against God; characterized by all that opposes God. This is what we might call “their world view.” It involves the world’s values, pleasures, pastimes, and aspirations. John says this world lies in the grip of the evil one ([1 John 5:19](#)); that it rejected Jesus when He came ([John 1:10](#)); that it does not know Him ([1 John 3:1b](#)); and consequently that it does not know and therefore also hates His followers ([John 15:18-19](#), [17:14](#)). It is in this sense that John speaks of the world in this passage.

The false teachers are successful “*in the world*” because of their thinking. Their theology accommodates the world’s beliefs. Their teaching is philosophically friendly to the prevailing currents of the day. Naturally, the world hears such teachers gladly. The world agrees with the teaching of the false teachers and thus opposes God.

- **1 John 4:6** – *We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*

John now summarizes the previous five verses into one statement. He declares those who truly know God know the Word. Those who don’t know God don’t listen to the Word.

The difference between [1 John 4:2](#) and this verse is that in verse 2 the test in [1 John 4:2](#) is whether people bring sincere and truthful words out of their heart, while the test in verse 6 is whether they will allow sincere and truthful words to go into their heart. The point of these verses is not merely to give a doctrinal test for recognizing false spirits. The point is to give a test also for recognizing the True Spirit.

The completed, written revelation of the Old and New Testaments is therefore the sole authority by which Christians must test all spiritual ideologies.

How do we listen to the prophets and apostles today? Clearly, we listen to them through their writings - the Scriptures! Are you in the Word daily, taking it in to your heart and not just your head? If you are holding fast to the trustworthy Word, when the winds of false doctrine blow, you find that the Word you held fast to now holds you fast!

**A. W. Tozer** had some wise counsel on “**How to Try the Spirits**”. ([Read an elaboration on the 7 principles in Chapter 29 of Tozer's book "Man the Dwelling Place of God."](#)) It provides seven tests to apply to any teaching:

- (1) How does the teaching affect my relationship with God? Is He magnified and glorified, or diminished?
- (2) How does the teaching affect my attitude toward the Lord Jesus Christ? Does it magnify Him and give Him first place? Or does it subtly shift my focus onto myself or some experience?
- (3) How does the teaching affect my attitude toward Scripture? Did the teaching come from and agree with the Word? Does it increase my love for the Word?
- (4) How does the teaching affect my self-life? Does it feed the self or crucify it? Does it feed pride or humility?
- (5) How does the teaching affect my relationships to other Christians? Does it cause me to withdraw, find fault, and exalt myself in superiority? Or does it lead me to genuine love for all that truly know Christ?
- (6) How does the teaching affect my relationship to the world system? Does it lead me to pursue the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life? Does it lead me to pursue worldly riches, reputation, and pleasures? Or does it crucify the world to me?
- (7) How does the teaching affect my attitude toward sin? Does it cause me to tolerate sin in my life or to turn from it and grow in holiness? Any teaching that makes holiness more acceptable and sin more intolerable is genuine.

### **1 John Commentary – Precept Austin**

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