



1 JOHN 4: TEST EVERY SPIRIT

1 John is a letter from the Apostle John, most likely to the church in Ephesus during a time of division and controversy. John attempts to reassure and encourage members after a split where “the spirit of the antichrist” and “false prophets” have led many astray. John tells his readers to resist these false teachings.

1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. **2** This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, **3** but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. **5** They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. **6** We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love

comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. **8** Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. **9** This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. **10** This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. **11** Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

13 This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. **14** And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. **15** If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. **16** And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. **17** This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. **18** There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

19 We love because he first loved us. **20** Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. **21** And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

STUDY NOTES

If a person goes from not believing in a spiritual world, to accepting that one exists, the initial reaction is likely one of terror! It's much easier to believe that there are no unseen forces at work. To realize that spiritual evil influences our world should be very unsettling! First we must understand the battlefield. Then we must equip ourselves through study and prayer for the ongoing spiritual battle. -JT

BlueLetterBible.org Commentary

Do not believe every spirit: John warned against believing **every spirit**; that is, we are never to assume every spiritual experience or every demonstration of spiritual power is from God. We must test spiritual experiences and spiritual phenomenon to see if they are in fact from God. Many, when first encountering the *reality* of the spiritual world, are too impressed and amazed to ask **whether they are of God**. This leads to easy deception.

But test the spirits: This is important because **many false prophets have gone out into the world**. Even though the early church had a strong life and a large measure of purity, John still knew the danger false prophets and their message was real in the early church.

Test the spirits, whether they are of God: This is the responsibility of every Christian, but especially of congregational leadership. According to 1 Corinthians 14:29 (*let the others judge*) and 1 Thessalonians 5:21 (*Test all things; hold fast what is good*), testing the spirits is the work of the body of Christ. This job is to be done using the gifts of discernment God has given to Christians in general, especially the leadership of a congregation.

All prophecy is to be judged by Scriptural standards. It is never to be received just because it is dramatic or given by a certain person. We trust in the principle that God will never contradict Himself, and we *know* what He has already said in His Word.

2 Peter 1:20-21 tells us true prophecy is never *of any private interpretation*. This means that there will be agreement and confirmation from the body of Christ, though perhaps (or probably) not *everyone* will agree or confirm.

Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God: True prophecy, and true teaching, will present a true Jesus. In John's day, the issue was about if Jesus had *truly* come in a *real* body of flesh and blood. Many Gnostic-influenced teachers said that Jesus, being God, could not have actually become a flesh and blood human being, because God could have no partnership with "impure" material stuff.

Today, some groups deny that Jesus is really God (such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Muslims). But way back in John's day, in this time closest to the actual life and ministry of Jesus on this earth, people didn't have a hard time believing Jesus was God. They had a hard time believing that he was a *real* man. This false teaching said Jesus was truly God (which is correct), but really a "make-believe" man. Today, we are passionate about saying, "Jesus is God," and we should be. But it is no less important to say, "Jesus is a man," because both the deity and humanity of Jesus are essential to our salvation.

Some think that this is the *only* test of false doctrine. This is not the only test, but it was the significant issue challenging the church in John's immediate time. Today a person might **confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh** yet deny that He is God as the Bible teaches He is God. They also are giving false doctrine because they are not presenting a *true Jesus*.

This is the spirit of the Antichrist: To deny the true Jesus is the basis of the spirit of the Antichrist, which John has already mentioned in 1 John 2:18-23. It is the spirit which both *opposes* the true Jesus and offers a *substitute* Jesus. The devil doesn't care at all if you know Jesus or love Jesus or pray to Jesus — as long as it is a *false* Jesus, a *make-believe* Jesus, a Jesus who is not there, and who therefore *cannot save*.

Is now already in the world: Though it will have its ultimate consummation in an end-times political and economic ruler, the essence of this antichrist *spirit* is present with us today. It is found everywhere a false Jesus is promoted in place of the true Jesus of the Bible.

We have many **spiritual enemies**, but not one of them is greater than **Jesus** who lives in us.

You are of God, little children, and have overcome them: The child of God need not fear the *spirit of Antichrist*, even though they should be warned of it, because they have the indwelling Spirit of God (1 John 3:24). That indwelling Spirit is greater than **he who is in the world** — Satan and all of his allies.

He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world: The believer has a resource for victory, the vital presence of the indwelling Jesus, which makes victory always possible — *if we will rely on He who is in you* instead of relying on ourselves. For those walking in this truth, victory is assured — **they have overcome them**. We have many spiritual enemies, but not *one* of them is greater than Jesus who lives in us.

They are of the world: Those who are of the world are evident because they speak as of the world; the influence of the world is evident in their speech. As Jesus said, *out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks* (Matthew 12:34). **And the world hears them:** Those who are of the world are also evident because the world hears them. They face none of the rejection the child of God will face from the world (1 John 3:1), because they are friends with the world.

He who is not of God does not hear us: Understanding just who hears what God has taught us through the apostles, as recorded in the New Testament, helps us to know the **spirit of truth and the spirit of error**. If someone hears what God has said in the Bible, we know he has the **spirit of truth**. If he does not hear it, he has the **spirit of error**. John makes it clear that **error** has a *spiritual* dynamic to it; it isn't just about being educated or smart. Some very educated, very smart people can still be influenced mightily by the **spirit of error**. Since error has a spiritual dynamic to it, keeping in the **spirit of truth** is a spiritual issue. We keep in the **spirit of truth** by clinging to Jesus, the One who said *I am the truth* (John 14:6).

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FOR THOUGH WE WALK
IN THE FLESH

WE DO NOT WAR
ACCORDING TO THE FLESH

2 CORINTHIANS 10:3

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