

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF FIRST JOHN

### ABIDING IN GOD AND HIS LOVE!

Read 1 John 4:1-11

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 4 includes two major ideas. The first is that believers ought to "test the spirits" to see whether they are from God (1 John 4:1–6). The second theme is that God, both loves us and "God is love" (1 John 4:7–21), leading believers to love one another.

#### **Test Every Spirit**

*“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.” (v1)*

Testing the spirits 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.

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.

#### **Jesus Christ Has Come in the Flesh**

*“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 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.” (vv2-3)*

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. 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 “spirits”. 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. The principle of presenting a true Jesus is essential to the testing of spirits. No one who presents a false Jesus, or one untrue to the Scriptures, can be regarded as a true prophet.

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. 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.

### Greater Is the One Who Is in You

*“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.” (v4)*

The action verb here is "overcome" (NIV, KJV), "conquered" (NRSV), which we already saw in 2:13-14, and will see once again in 5:4. The verb is *nikaō*, "to overcome someone, vanquish." It meant to prevail in battle, in the games, or in any contest. We may seem weak in ourselves, says John. But in us lives the mighty Spirit of God whose power so far surpasses the enemy that there is no comparison. The Spirit of God is greater!

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.

- 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.
- He, who is in you, is greater than he who is in the world means the Christian has no place for fear. We have many spiritual enemies, but not one of them is greater than Jesus who lives in us.

### Whom Does the World Listen To?

*“They are of the world. Therefore, they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. 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.” (vv5-6)*

"They" refers to the false teachers; "we" refers to the true teachers, namely, the apostles. John is saying that the way you can recognize true believers is if they listen to and accept the apostolic teaching. He goes beyond this to mention the spiritual basis of a person's position. "The Spirit of truth," of course, is the Holy Spirit (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), who dwells within all those who are born of God. "The Spirit of falsehood" (NIV) or "error" (NRSV, KJV) translates *planē*, "wandering from the path of truth, error, delusion, deceit, deception."

### God Is Love

*“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (vv7-8)*

In these key verses, John exhorts his readers to love "one another," that is, our Christian brothers and sisters. Then he supports it with two primary assertions:

- Love comes from God, that is, everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God and vice versa.
- God is love.

The first assertion John has been developing throughout the letter. But the second is unique: "God is love." In fact, "God is love" (seen both here and in 4:16) is one of the high points of revelation about God anywhere in the Bible.

What does this mean that God is love? It certainly isn't limiting, stating that love is all that God is. God is certainly just, righteous, holy, omniscient, etc. But it means that in all his actions he acts with love: justice with love, holiness with love, predestination with love, etc. It also means that unless we understand this about God, we can't really understand him at all. Certainly, the Christian understanding of God as love is unique among all the world religions. Only in Christianity is love elevated to the highest level of God's essential character.

God is love also means that unless we learn to love and forgive, rather than hate, hold grudges, and be self-centered, we can't really know or understand God. John isn't talking about a theoretical understanding of God, but an *experiential and practical* understanding of God.

### **True Love**

*"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. 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. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."* (vv9-11)

This shows us what love is and what it means. Love is not only defined by the sacrifice of Jesus (as stated in 1 John 3:16); it is also defined by the giving of the Father. It was a sacrifice for the Father to send the Second Person of the Trinity, and a sacrifice to pour out the judgment we deserved upon God the Son.

We need to appreciate this fully and receive the Fatherly love God has to give us. Some of us, for whatever reason, have come to think of God the Father as aloof and mean, perhaps the so-called "angry God" of the Old Testament. In this wrong thinking, many imagine they prefer the nice and loving Jesus instead. But the Father loves us too; and the love Jesus showed in His ministry was the same love God the Father has towards us. We can receive the healing power in our Father's love.

### **Only Begotten:**

John is careful to call Jesus the only begotten Son. This special term means Jesus has a Sonship that is unique (only) and begotten indicates that Jesus and the Father are of the same substance, the same essential Being. We are adopted sons and daughters of God, but we are not of the same essential nature and being as God — we are human beings. But Jesus is the only begotten Son, meaning His Sonship is different than ours; He was and is of the same essential nature and being as God the Father. We are human beings; He is a "God-being" — who added humanity to His deity.

The love of the Father was not only in the sending of the Son, but also in what that sending accomplishes for us. It brings life to all who trust in Jesus and His work on their behalf, because He is the propitiation for our sins. Propitiation has the idea of a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God. God rightly regarded us, apart from Him, as worthy targets of His judgment. We were rebels and enemies of Him, even if we didn't know it. But on the cross, Jesus took the punishment our sin deserved — His sacrifice turned away the judgment we would have received. We easily think how this shows the love of Jesus, but John wants us to understand it also shows the love of God the Father: He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

The greatness of God's love is shown not only in saving us from the judgment we deserved, but also in wanting us to live through Him. Do we live through Him? This is a great way to define the Christian life, to live through Him. "God has sent His only begotten Son" shows the love of God, because love gives its

best. There was nothing better God the Father could give to lost humanity than the gift of the Son of God Himself. As Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians 9:15, Jesus was the Father's indescribable gift.

### **Love One Another**

Having received this love from God, we are directed to love one another. This pattern of receiving from God, then giving to others was familiar to John (John 13:14).

When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, and showed such great love and servanthood to them, we might have expected Him to conclude by gesturing to His own feet and asking who among them was going to do to Him what He had just done for them. Instead, Jesus said: *If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet (John 13:14)*. The proper way to love God in response to His love for us is to go out and love one another.

This love will lead to practical action. "Has anybody offended you? Seek reconciliation. 'Oh, but I am the offended party.' So was God, and he went straight away and sought reconciliation. Brother, do the same. 'Oh, but I have been insulted.' So was God: all the wrong was towards him, yet He sent. 'Oh, but that person is so unworthy.' So are you; but 'God loved you and sent his Son.' Go do likewise.

If we do not love one another, how can we say that we have received the love of God and have been born of Him? Love is the proof we are taught to look for. If you had a pipe that was clogged — water kept going into it, but never came out, that pipe would be useless. You would replace it. Just so, God puts His love into our lives that it might flow out. We want the Lord to clear us and fill us so that His love can flow through us.

