

“The Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Error” (An Exposition of 1 John 4:4-6)¹

Introduction

Back in v.1 the Apostle John told us *not* to believe every spirit, but rather to **“test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”** Why? Because, as he tells us there in that same verse, **“many false prophets have gone out into the world.”** Not a few scattered false prophets or false teachers here and there, but **“many.”**

False teaching & false teachers will *abound* in this life, and so it behooves us as believers to be watchful and to **“test the spirits”** to make sure that we are not deceived. And how are we to do that? *In general*, we are to be like the noble-minded Bereans, who (as Luke tells us in Acts 17:11), **“received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”** They tested what they heard even the Apostle Paul say (!) by **“examining the Scriptures.”**

And so we too must test whatever we hear and whatever we read by the clear teaching of Scripture. As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21, we must **“not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.”** Do you do that?

Do *you* follow along in your Bible as you hear the preaching and teaching of the Word of God? Do you **“test all things”** according to Scripture so that you may then **“hold fast what is good”**?

But John also gives a more narrow and specific doctrinal test to enable us to guard against false teaching. In v.2-3 he tells us

“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.”

The primary litmus test of true and false teaching is to be found in what it teaches about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Any teaching that *denies* the apostolic doctrine of Christ regarding His true divinity or His incarnation and His true humanity is *not* from God, but is of **“the spirit of the antichrist.”**

With so many **“false prophets”** having gone out into the world (v.1) and with **“the spirit of the antichrist”** being **“in the world already”** (v.3), what are we to do? Does that thought make you feel a bit overwhelmed? Do you wonder how someone like you, who might just be a simple believer in Christ and who might *not* have advanced theological training and education, is supposed to be able to avoid the smooth talk of the deceivers?

If so, John has some good news for you in our text today. He tells us that those of us who have truly believed upon Christ for salvation (unlike the false teachers), are **“from God”** and **“have overcome them.”** (v.4) *How?* Because **“he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”** (v.4) In other words, the false teachers may have **“the spirit of the antichrist”** in them, but we who believe have the Holy Spirit indwelling us, and He protects us and makes us to abide in the truth of Christ!

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

The Believer's Victory

The *first* thing that John draws our attention to is *the believer's victory* over the false teachers and the spirit of the antichrist. In v.4 he tells us:

“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.”

Notice that John doesn't say that they might overcome them or that they would overcome them in the future, but rather that they had *already* overcome them! Their victory and ours is described as being in the *past tense*. In fact, the word that John uses (from which we get the word *nike*, which means victory) is actually in the *perfect* tense, which in this case has the idea of something that has been completed in the past and has an ongoing and permanent effect.

Now what is this overcoming or victory that we have over false teaching and false teachers? They certainly hadn't bested them in any kind of formal theological debate or anything. They hadn't personally refuted their false teaching as John was doing in this very letter.

So what was it? Simply put, it was *their faith*, and the *constancy* of their faith. As John himself goes on to say in the very next chapter:

“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4–5)

As the old hymn puts it, “faith is the victory that overcomes the world.” James Montgomery Boice sums it up this way:

“The false teachers had been seeking to deceive these believers, but they had not succeeded. Merely by testing them and refusing to be taken in by their lies, the Christians have conquered.”²

F.F. Bruce likewise notes:

“John's readers were not more learned, more skilled in philosophical debate, than the false teachers; yet by refusing to be persuaded by the false teachers they had overcome them.”³

Sometimes that is enough. *Just stand fast in the faith*. That is what John was talking about earlier in the letter when he said:

“Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.” (1 John 2:24–25)

Immerse yourself in the reading and study of the Scriptures. It is the Word of God that the Holy Spirit uses to work faith in us, both at our conversion as well as in our growth in grace and knowledge.

² *The Epistles of John*, p.110

³ *The Gospel & Epistles of John*, p.105-106

The Work of the Indwelling Holy Spirit

That brings us to our second point this morning. How is it that we who believe have overcome those who are in the world? How have we come to have this victory over the world and even over the spirit of the antichrist? It is only by the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit within us! Once again, in v.4 John tells us:

““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.”

Our victory over the world, false teachers, and even over the spirit of the antichrist has nothing to do with anything inherent in any of us. It is not due to how smart, educated, clever, or strong we are. In fact, if all that we had to rely upon were our own intellect and strength, we would have lost a long time ago. We would have no hope of victory at all.

And so how do we conquer? For one reason - **“he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”** John is talking about *the Holy Spirit*, the third person of the Trinity, “the Lord and Giver of life,” as the Nicene Creed puts it.

We who believe are not left to ourselves in this life after our conversion. The Holy Spirit Himself indwells every believer in Christ, and is Himself our *Sanctifier* and the guarantee of our salvation! It is by the work of the Holy Spirit within us that we are *sealed unto salvation*. In Ephesians 1:13–14 Paul writes:

“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”

It is the Holy Spirit who makes us spiritually alive from the dead; who works faith in us so that we are united to Christ by faith; and who applies all of the benefits of Christ's redemption to us so that we become partakers of all of the many spiritual blessings that we have in Christ!

And He who is in us is *infinitely greater* than he who is in the world. It calls to mind the story in 2 Kings chapter 6, when the king of Syria **“sent . . . horses and chariots and a great army, and they came by night and surrounded the city”** (v.14) where the prophet Elisha lived.

When Elisha's servant left the house in the morning he saw the army with chariots all around the city and said, **“Alas, my master! What shall we do?”** (v.15) What could they do? They were no match for an army! But remember the words of Elisha to his frightened servant:

“He said, “Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” Then Elisha prayed and said, “O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” (v.16-17)

God's angelic armies were encamped **“all around Elisha”** in order to protect him! As the Psalmist tells us in Psalm 34:7, **“The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.”** And as Paul says in Romans 8:31, **“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”**

The Mark of a Believer

Last but not least, John teaches us that because of the work of the Holy Spirit within believers, we will listen to and follow the truth apostolic doctrine of Christ. This he describes to us as *one of the marks of a true Christian*. In v.5-6 John writes:

“They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. 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.”

The false teachers are not from God but **“from the world.”** That is why **“the world listens to them.”** Think about that when it comes to what is being preached in many pulpits today! Far too many pulpits in our day are filled by men (and women!) who are *guilty of preaching a worldly message*.

They want to attract a large crowd, and so they preach what the worldly man or woman wants to hear; what makes the worldly person and the unrepentant person *comfortable*. Sin is either not mentioned at all, or else it is watered down or redefined.

At times the only “sins” that are boldly preached against are those “sins” that *our culture* presently finds distasteful. They dare not preach against *any* of the sins that our perverse culture holds dear. Is this not an accurate description of much of liberal Christianity (as if there could be such a thing) and of what is seen in much of the so-called “church growth movement.”

But John says boldly that he and the other apostles **“are from God”** and so **“whoever knows God listens to us”** (v.6). No pastor or teacher today has the right to say any such thing. In our day that would be the mark of a cult leader or false teacher to claim such a thing.

We have no apostles today, but we have their doctrine preserved for us in the Scriptures. And so whoever truly knows God listens to the apostolic doctrine found in the Word of God! Ian Hamilton writes:

“One of the distinguishing marks of people who know God is that they listen to, believe, and embrace, apostolic teaching. . . . Your response to the ministry of God's Word will in large measure reveal whether you 'know God' or whether you are 'not from God'.”⁴

And this just makes sense, doesn't it? After all, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:14,

“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

The **“things of the Spirit of God”** are only truly understood by those who have the Holy Spirit at work in them. The natural person – the person without the Spirit of God – **“is not able to understand them”** because it is only by the illumination of the Holy Spirit that we can truly understand and believe!

Our Lord Jesus says something very similar to this in the Gospel of John. In John 10:27–30 He says:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life,

4 *The Letters of John*, p.56

and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

How are Christ's sheep distinguished from the goats, from those who do not believe? By their response to His voice, which is heard in the Scriptures! His sheep (and His sheep alone!) hear His voice and recognize Him as their Shepherd, and what is the result? *They follow Him!*

What about *you*? Do *you* recognize the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Scriptures? When you hear the Scriptures being preached, do you hear the voice of God speaking to you in them? And do you then believe and follow Christ? If so, that means that you are born of God and know God!

This is how we are to know **"the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error"** (or falsehood). And so make it your aim and habit to be reading the Scriptures; to meditate upon and study the Bible; and to attend diligently upon the ministry of the Word of God.

By this you will grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ; will abide in the truth of Christ; and will be better-equipped to recognize the counterfeits and deceivers when you hear them.

And may this help each of us not only to grow in grace, but also to be strengthened in our assurance, so that in the new year to come, the joy of the Lord may be our strength more and more, to the glory of God. - Amen.