

Study Guide



1 Jn. 4:1-6 "Discerning the Truth from Error" Nov. 6, 2016

Welcome (40 Minutes)

Be intentional to have authentic relationships...

Worship (5 Minutes)

As the group transitions from of a time of fellowship to a time of intentional study of the word, it is important to facilitate that transition with a time of worship. This can look like praying together, singing songs together, or rejoicing in what the Lord has done throughout the week.

Word (45 Minutes)

While preparing to write a commentary on this passage of 1 John, it occurred to me that one of the dangers we face in the postmodern church is a temptation to dismiss the reality of evil, spiritual forces that battle against God's Church and His Gospel. Sin and Hell have become more identified as philosophical concepts than realities. We may have become desensitized to this reality of the demonic spiritual world by our culture's obsession and preoccupied with Hollywood and television shows that depict evil, zombies, ghosts, vampires and werewolves, as almost laughable. Of course the real demonic world is much more sinister and real than ghouls and goblins and more clever in their deception making many to dismiss their reality.

For more in depth study check out the following pages...

Walk Prayer & Missions

December 18-28—South Sudan
For further information visit
norrisferrychurch.org

Calendar

November 6th—Baptism Training, [Jammin' for the Johnson's](#)
November 13th— Member's Meeting,
Orphan Sunday

Welcome (40 Minutes)

As you fellowship with one another, please be intentional about sharing what the Lord is doing in your lives. Get to know one another and encourage one another. Are your conversations pointing one another toward Jesus?

Worship (5 Minutes)

If you are looking for a song to sing this week, here are the lyrics to "[This I Believe](#)":

Our Father everlasting
The all creating One
God Almighty

Through Your Holy Spirit
Conceiving Christ the Son
Jesus our Savior

I believe in God our Father
I believe in Christ the Son
I believe in the Holy Spirit
Our God is three in one
I believe in the resurrection
That we will rise again
For I believe in the name of Jesus

Our Judge and our Defender
Suffered and crucified
Forgiveness is in You

Descended into darkness
You rose in glorious life
Forever seated high

I believe in God our Father
I believe in Christ the Son
I believe in the Holy Spirit
Our God is three in one
I believe in the resurrection
That we will rise again
For I believe in the name of Jesus

I believe in You
I believe You rose again
I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord
[x2]

I believe in God our Father
I believe in Christ the Son
I believe in the Holy Spirit
Our God is three in one
I believe in the resurrection
That we will rise again
For I believe in the name of Jesus
[x2]

For I believe in the name of Jesus
For I believe in the name of Jesus

I believe in life eternal
I believe in the virgin birth
I believe in the saints' communion
And in Your holy Church
I believe in the resurrection
When Jesus comes again
For I believe, in the name of Jesus

I believe in God our Father
I believe in Christ the Son
I believe in the Holy Spirit
Our God is three in one
I believe in the resurrection
That we will rise again
For I believe in the name of Jesus
[x2]

For I believe in the name of Jesus

Introduction

There are real spirits, evil demonic spirits, which oppose Jesus Christ, His people and the Gospel. These spirits are as real as the Holy Spirit of God, living and breathing life into His true people. John is not using a simple humanistic definition of “spirit” like we might think about in a pep rally or football game, rather real entities that manifest from the spirit world into our physical world.

Sometimes we think of the Gospel message in philosophical and moral terms, and yes, there are some aspects that are both moral and philosophical. But, the essence of God’s redemptive plan is spiritual in nature with out-workings that are into our natural world. Some examples; the temptation and fall of man, the calling of Abram, the deliverance of Israel from Egypt by God’s plagues, the shadows and types of the sacrificial system given in the wilderness, the incarnation and temptation of Jesus, the demon possessed people Jesus encountered, etc. Paul highlights this reality in Ephesians 6:12, ***“For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens.”***

So it is with this understanding that we will see what John is teaching. This battle of spirits had taken place in full view of God’s people to whom John is writing. Some of those who were under Satan’s deception, those who were false teachers and antichrists, had left the fellowship along with their followers. John’s admonition and instruction in these verses implies the necessity of a continual guard of Christ’s Church.

John is not saying we need to look for demons and demonic connections in every activity, although as mentioned above there is real demonic activity behind many secular pastimes and activities in the world. The spiritual world is not neutral. John is saying we need special spiritual discernment to guard our hearts, homes and churches.

Some translations use the word *Discern* in place of *Test*. The latter term helps us understand that we have a more active role in our response to *testing the spirits*.

Why are we to discern the spirits? (4:1)

Discernment is essential because Satan and his forces are actively at work in the world.

John instructs the reader “do not believe every spirit, but test to see if they are of God.”

We need spiritual discernment because Satan and his forces are alive and well promoting error at every opportunity through heretical false teaching, half-truths, worldly philosophy and secular associations.

Behind all spiritually false teaching is the spirit of error led by Satan and his demonic forces. Whether they know it, false teachers (and their false teaching) are under the influence of an evil spirit, a spirit of antichrist, as John described in chapter 2. From the day that Satan deceived Eve in the garden until the present day, the spirit of error has promoted false teaching and lies that lead people away from the living and true God.

All false religions and heretical teachings have at their core demonic influence and direction. Just as the false teachers in John’s day were not calling for the blatant worship of Satan, so it is with our day. They were, and are, more crafty and sinister than the obvious complete denial of Christ - thus the need for our testing and discernment.

Just as in John's day, they use Christian lingo and profess to be true followers of Jesus. Jesus calls them wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt 7:15). Paul said they are those who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ and righteousness. Satan himself appears as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:13-14). Remember a half truth is a whole lie and Satan is the father of lies.

How do we test the spirits? (4:2-3)

Discernment is based on the confession concerning Jesus Christ.

Now in our world of cultural Christianity, most everyone would agree that Jesus did live and did claim to be God's son. However, that sort of confession is not what John has in mind in these verses. We can discern John's mean in here by focusing on the meaning of the word "*confess*."

To confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh means to certainly agree with that statement. But, it also means something more than mere acknowledgement of this fact. The demons believe (agree) that Jesus is the son of God who has come in the flesh (Mark 1:24, 3:11, 5:7, James 2:19) The word *confess* used here carries with it the implication of Lordship - the submitting of our lives to Him as Lord (Romans 10:9-10). He is our new Master and we have become slaves unto righteousness. We practice righteousness because He is righteous. (Romans 6:18, I John 3:7)

In other words, Jesus is not a simply means to our personal spiritual ends. True faith confesses Christ as Lord and our desperate need of His sustaining grace. Some of the false teachers taught that Jesus was merely a spiritual apparition (Docetism) while others taught that Jesus was only a man, but God had bestowed a divine spirit upon Him. (Gnosticism) John's test refutes these claims.

In these verses, John uses the words "has come," to imply two truths about Jesus to combat the error being taught about the nature of Christ. "Has come" refers to Christ Jesus' heavenly pre-existence as God - His deity (John 1:1,2), and His earthly, physical, human existence (John 1:14). Jesus was born through a natural birth like us. Jesus was born and grew to manhood (Luke 2:52), fully divine, fully human, God's only Son.

Why is this truth so important? If Jesus was not fully human and fully divine, then His death on the cross at Calvary could not atone for man by satisfying God's just wrath against sin. (Romans 5:12-21) This is a glorious mystery in the Gospel.

How is true discernment confirmed in our own hearts? (4:4-6)

Discernment is evidenced by our response and actions.

Again, John points to the new birth, or Regeneration, (John 1:13, 3:3) Children of God. (1 John 2:29) Christianity is more than ascribing to a Statement of Faith, a Confession, doctrines, or moral code - although these are essential in our practice and growth as true followers of Jesus (1 John 3:3). It is a matter of being born of God, the reception of a new life in Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Without the New Birth and the indwelling Spirit, a person is incapable of truly understanding God's word and obeying His will (John 8:43, 47) and, as a result, being able to discern spiritual truth from error by the aid of the Holy Spirit. (1 John 2:26-27)

This is not to say spiritual immaturity, or ignorance, is the same as heresy. John points out that on the other hand false teachers are from the world, speak from the world and the world listens to them. (1 John 4:5) There are many popular worldly messages and false teachings circulating in the Church today. False teachers often gather large followings with the message that God exists to help them fulfill their personal desires. It seems the god of the new millennium is more concerned about our personal happiness, than personal holiness, and sin is merely the circumstance of bad choices.

Humanistic self-help books populate the religious section of our book stores and the internet is filled with the message of prosperity and faith. Many so called spiritual books have popularize these notions that the human condition is basically good, all that is needed for personal happiness, peace and favor with God is simply being spiritual and relatively moral in the culture. The highest spiritual good is acceptance and tolerance. This prevalent therapeutic view of God has made it unpopular and considered unloving to tell people that they are sinners at heart, incapable of pleasing God in their own efforts and in desperate need of salvation by a personal Savior, and that there is only one true Savior, Jesus Christ.

John next addresses submission to sound Biblical instruction as part of our confirmation. In John's day that would have been the very words from the Apostles themselves and the Old Testament writings. *"We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us."* (1 John 4:6) This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. For us it is the recorded apostolic teachings of the New Testament, along with the Old Testament writings. (2 Timothy 3:16)

In Acts 17:11 we see this acted out in the first century church. *"Now these Jews were nobler than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."* Like the Bereans, believers in our day also have a responsibility to search the Scriptures and confirm the messages they are hearing. Each of us should not only use this standard for truth in the messages we are hearing, but also as a personal standard in our obedience to God's word. John has pointed to several tests concerning Apostolic (biblical) authority; love for fellowship with Christ's people, conviction over sin, obedience to Scripture, friendship with the world, longing for Christ's soon return, pursuit of righteous and holy living, love for the brethren, a fruitful prayer life, conviction by the Holy Spirit and suffering for the cause of Christ.

Conclusion

In closing, we can take confidence in God's electing grace to secure us in salvation, and aid us in our sanctification (pursuing holiness and righteousness) for God's own Glory. With our lives secured in Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, along with the written testimony of Scripture, we are then able to test the spirits and discern truth from error. I am reminded of a great verse of Scripture that helps me understand my personal responsibility in salvation and has been a source of confidence for my Christian walk. *"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."* Philippians 2:12-13

Sermon Questions

What Does it Say?

1. In verse 1 John urges the people in the church to test the spirits. According to what criterion should they test the spirits? Why should they be vigilant to test the spirits? Look also at Jesus' and Paul's warnings about false prophets in Mark 13:22-23, Matthew 7:15-16, and Acts 20:28-30.
2. In verses 2 & 3 John says there are two kinds of spirits they should watch for? What are these spirits called in verses 2-3?
3. What does John say in verse 4 about the faithful members of the church he is writing to? How have they been able to overcome the false teachers that have gone out from them?
4. How does John describe the false teachers in verse 5?
5. How does John describe the speakers of the truth in verse 6?

Sermon Questions

What Does it Mean?

1. Why do you think John says "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits" instead of saying do not believe all the things you hear from various teachers? Why does he use the word "spirits" instead of "teachers"? What does it mean to test the spirits? How would you go about testing the spirits?
2. What doctrinal test does John say the church people should use to test the spirits (vs. 2)? What does it mean to confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? How does the word "Christ" identify who Jesus is? What is significant about the statement that the Christ has come in the flesh?
3. Are all people who acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh genuine Christians (Mark 1:23-24), (James 2:19)?
4. In verse 4 John says that these believers have overcome them (false prophets). What evidence is there that they have overcome them (1 John 2:18-20)? Why were they able to overcome them (John 16:12-15)?

5. What are some striking examples of the point made in verse 5 that we can see today in our American society?
6. In verse 6 John says, “Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us.” Isn’t that kind of an uncomfortable, brash statement? Look at John 18:36-38. How is Jesus statement before Pilate similar to what John says here in verse 6? Who are the “us” that John is referring to in this statement?

Sermon Questions

How Does it Apply?

1. Do you tend to be a person who wants to agree with anything anyone says? Are you willing to test the spirits to see if they are from God? How would you go about doing that? What are some cautions we should use in testing the spirits and challenging what people say?

Walk (30 minutes)

After enjoying fellowship, worship, and time in God’s word together, it is now time to pray together as a group and encourage one another in the faith. It is very easy for this portion of the group time to be consumed by the other portions. However, this segment of the group time is crucially important. It answers the question, how do we apply what we are learning in 1 John to our lives today?

Many groups have found that it is helpful to sometimes break up into a men’s group and a women’s group for the purpose of being able to be more transparent and honest as we encourage one another and keep one another accountable. I encourage you to try this in your groups.

In addition to praying for, and encouraging, one another, this portion of the group time should also be used for planning how your group can participate in God’s work outside the walls of our church – “neighbors and nations.” Discuss with your group some ideas on how you can be intentional with building relationships with your neighbors and co-workers. What can your Community Group do to impact the area around you?

May the Lord bless and encourage you as you lead your groups! Know that we are praying for you on a weekly basis and that we are here to help you in any way that we can!

What does it say?

1. They should test the spirits to “see whether they are from God”. They should be vigilant to test the spirits because many false prophets have come into the world as was also predicted by Jesus and Paul in Matthew 7:15-16 and Acts 20:28-30.
2. They two spirits that they should watch for are “the Spirit of God” and the spirit of the antichrist.
3. He acknowledges that they are from God and they have overcome the false prophets that were among them. They were able to do this because the Holy Spirit within them is greater than the spirit of antichrist that is in the false prophets.
4. John describes the false teachers as being from the world, speaking from the world’s perspective, and listened to by the world.
5. John describes the speakers of the truth as from God, being listened to by those who know God, and being of the Spirit of truth.

What does it mean?

1. John probably says to test the spirits because he is calling attention to the source of what people say and teach. To test the spirits is to test the content and tone of what people are teaching. According to verse 2 one way you go about testing the spirits is to examine what they are saying about Jesus.
2. John says they can test the spirits by examining what they say about Jesus. Do they confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? The word “Christ” means promised Messiah. This identifies Jesus as God’s long awaited Messiah to establish an everlasting kingdom on earth. This statement acknowledges that the Son of God has appeared in the flesh in the person of Jesus. It acknowledges the Incarnation of Jesus.
3. Not all people who acknowledge Jesus Christ has come in the flesh are genuine Christians. Even the devils believe and tremble (James 2:19), and the evil spirits in Jesus day showed that they recognized who he was (Mark 1:23-24). However if a teacher denies that Jesus who came in the flesh is the Messiah of God, he is a false teacher.
4. In 1 John 2:18-20 John talks about those false teachers that were in this church that he was writing to. They ultimately left that church because their false teachings were not accepted. John says they overcame because the Spirit that is in them is greater than the spirit in the world. In John 2:20 he says they overcame because of the Holy Spirit. This function of the Holy Spirit was promised by Jesus in John 16:12-15.
5. Today in our society we can see teachers of the world saying that a marriage can be between a man and a man or a woman with a woman. These teachers are speaking from a secular worldview, and the world listens to them, so much so, that those who do not accept their teachings are ostracized and labeled as immoral. There are many other examples that you may think of.
6. This is very similar to what Jesus said before Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Then Pilate scoffed, “What is truth?” The “us” that John is talking about in verse 6—“whoever listens to us” are the apostles who wrote the New Testament Scriptures that testify of Jesus.

Notes

Docetism was an error with several variations concerning the nature of Christ. Generally, it taught that Jesus only appeared to have a body--that he was not really incarnate (Greek, "dokeo" = "to seem"). This error developed out of the dualistic philosophy which viewed matter as inherently evil--that God could not be associated with matter; and that God, being perfect and infinite, could not suffer. Therefore, God as the word, could not have become flesh per John 1:1, 14, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us . . . " This denial of a true incarnation meant that Jesus did not truly suffer on the cross, and that He did not rise from the dead. The basic principle of Docetism was refuted by the Apostle John in 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; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world." Also, 2 John 7, "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist Docetism was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

Gnosticism is a philosophical worldview that stresses special knowledge. The word comes from the Greek gnosis meaning knowledge. Gnosticism was prevalent in the first century during and after the time of Christ. It maintains that matter is evil and spirit is good. Because matter is bad human souls, in a sense, are trapped in a material world. **Gnostics** maintained that they had special knowledge about God which enabled them to understand the human condition as it relates to the world. This helped them to deny the world, by asserting that the good human spirit need not be restricted by the evil material world. true God.