

OpenTheo

1 John 4



1 John - Steve Gregg

In this passage from the Bible, 1 John 4, the author warns against false prophets and emphasizes the importance of testing spirits. The passage highlights the heresy of Gnosticism and stresses the need to confess Jesus as coming in the flesh, refuting any denial of God's part in human existence. The author also mentions the gift of prophecy and urges discernment when it comes to prophetic utterances, as not everyone speaking in the name of the Lord may actually be a true prophet. The passage concludes by emphasizing the importance of loving God and one another, as well as the need to have boldness and not fear in expressing that love.

Transcript

Let's turn to 1 John 4 and begin reading at verse 1. John says, 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. 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. 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.

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 thereof. Now this section really began in the last verse of chapter 3. And that's where in the latter part of verse 24, John said, And by this we know that he abides in us by the Spirit whom he has given us.

We know if we are Christians. We know if we are really in Christ and he is in us. Because of the Spirit that he has given us.

He is going to say the same thing in chapter 4 in verse 13. Chapter 4 verse 13 he is

going to say, By this we know that we abide in him, and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. Now this is one of the four ways that John says we can know we are really Christians.

He has given us four tests in this book. And they are all four intermingled and interwoven throughout the book. But sometimes we know that we are Christians because of our belief in Christ.

Whosoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. Whosoever confesses that Jesus is the Christ, God dwells in him, and he in God. He that confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in him.

Whoever confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God. These statements all have to do with our theological orthodoxy about Christ. We must believe that he is the Son of God.

We must believe that he is Christ. And in the particular context of the doctrinal controversy in John's day, to confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh was very important also. Because the Gnostics, and particularly those who suggested that Jesus was not actually physical, but that he was a phantom creature, were denying that Jesus had come in the flesh.

A very important heresy that was refuted by John. And later, in the second century, people like Irenaeus wrote whole books against that heresy, which is called Gnosticism. That particular branch of Gnosticism that said that Jesus was a phantom and not physical was called Gnosticism.

The following of a Gnostic teacher named Gnostic. There's another branch of Gnosticism called Corinthianism, from the teacher Corinthus, who taught that Jesus was not a phantom, but that the Christ essence was a phantom. It was sort of an aeon that came upon the ordinary man during his baptism, and he became then the Christ.

These were the Gnostic heresies of the day. John seems to have an interest in refuting both branches of Gnosticism, in this book it seems to me. But when he says every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, he's particularly aiming that at the false teachers who are docetists.

The followers of docetists who taught that Jesus wasn't physical, he wasn't in the flesh, he was a mere ghost. So that is why John makes an issue of that. Without that context, you might wonder, why would it be so important for people to confess that Jesus has come in the flesh? I mean, doesn't that just mean he's like any of us? I came in the flesh, you came in the flesh, doesn't that just mean he's a historical person? Well, it does actually mean he's a historical person, but in the context of the heresy that John was up against, it was very important to emphasize the in the flesh part, that Jesus came in the

flesh.

Now, one could even find perhaps a hint of the deity of Christ in this particular statement, because John, if his readers were familiar with his gospel, and some think they were, some think this letter was a sermon based on his gospel. In his gospel, he said the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. And that's, of course, a reference to Jesus becoming a human being.

But the word was made flesh, it says in John chapter 1, verse 14, he's already earlier in chapter 1 said that the word was God. So the doctrine of John in the first chapter of John, the gospel, is that God, the word, became flesh. Now, those who are denying that Jesus came in the flesh in this instance were probably not denying the God part, but the flesh part.

In our day, there would be people who deny the God part. They say, well, sure, Jesus was a physical person living on the earth, but he wasn't God. John's doctrine was that God, the word, came in the flesh.

So, the first test of orthodoxy is the doctrinal test. Do we confess the truth about Jesus? Is he the Christ? Is he the son of God? Is he come in the flesh? That's test number one. The second test we've encountered is the morality test, or the righteousness test.

And this has come up numerous times. In chapter 2, he said, he who says, I know him and does not keep his commandments, this is chapter 2, verse 4, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. You say you're a Christian, you don't keep Christ's commandments? You're living in disobedience? Well, you're lying when you say that Christ is in you and that you know him.

He says in verse 3, in the verse before that, chapter 2, verse 3, by this we know that we know him if we keep his commandments. That's how we know we're Christians, besides having a proper confession of Christ, we have a life that conforms to his teachings. And so we see, of course, these strong statements in chapter 3, where he says in verse 4, whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.

Now you know that he was manifested to take away our sins, and in him is no sin. Whoever abides in him does not sin, and by this he means practice sin. Whoever practices sin has neither seen him nor known him.

He said this is how we know the spirit of God, or if we're children of God, we're children of the devil. He says that in verse 10 and 11. No, just 10.

He says in chapter 3, verse 10, in this the children of God are, and the children of the devil are manifest. Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God. And then he has the third test, nor is he who does not love his brother.

The love test. The love test is going to be a focal point of the later part of chapter 4 also. He's actually going to say whoever doesn't love doesn't know God, because God is love.

The test of love. So we have three tests already behind us in this book. We have the test of theology, which is basically your Christology.

What do you say about Christ? The second test is do you live obediently to Christ? Thirdly, do you love, which again is living obediently to him, but love is the particular trait that is evident. Then we have this, the spirit. Do you possess the spirit? In chapter 3, 24, he says by this we know that he abides in us by the spirit which he has given us.

However, this is the most ethereal, the most nebulous, the most invisible of the tests. I can know instantly if I believe certain things about Christ, or if I'm living obediently to him or living in rebellion. I can even know if I love my brother or not by certain tests.

Do I see my brother in need and shut up my bowels of compassion from him? I don't have a love of God. But how do I know if I have the spirit or not? I might feel like I have the Holy Spirit, but how do I know the spirit, the real spirit, versus another spirit? Because these heretics also believe they have the spirit of God. But John said you shouldn't trust every spirit.

And that's how he begins chapter 4. Don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are the spirit of God or not. There are other spirits, and there are many false prophets, he says, that have gone out into the world. Now, he tells us how to test them, but let's talk about verse 1 by itself.

Test the spirits. Don't believe every spirit. This is presupposing something in the early church that isn't always presupposed in our modern times.

And that is that in the church there were people who spoke by the spirit prophetically. Now, all people who spoke in the church prophetically professed to be speaking by the spirit of God. Prophecy was speaking under the influence of a spirit, preferably the spirit of God, if you're a Christian.

There were false prophets who spoke by other spirits, but the point is that it was understood that in a spiritual community there would be people speaking under the influence of the spirit, and they would give prophetic utterances. This is not only true in biblical times. I have a book here of the apostolic fathers.

In a moment I'm going to read you something from the Didache, which was a book written probably at the end of the second or third generation of Christians at the turn of the first century. And they still had prophets in their churches, and they still had to test the prophets. But the point here is that in every church service some would profess to be speaking through the spirit prophetically.

Now, when speaking prophetically, a person is not claiming to give their own opinion. It's different than a teacher. A teacher isn't a prophet.

Paul said that God gave some apostles, some prophets, some pastors, and teachers. Teachers are different than prophets or apostles. I profess to be a teacher.

I don't profess to be a prophet. And a teacher's not doing the same thing a prophet is. Hopefully a teacher is being led by the spirit or is being taught by the spirit so that he can give out reliable information.

That certainly is what he hopes for. But he doesn't claim to be speaking under direct influence like a prophet does. A teacher does not claim that everything he says is necessarily the word of the Lord, but rather an exposition of what the word of the Lord says.

A prophet, on the other hand, claims to be speaking the very words of God as God is speaking them through him or her. There were female prophets also. Now, the presence of prophets in the church is taken for granted in the Bible, and we do not take that for granted in our churches today.

In fact, some churches actually have that as an official doctrine that there is no gift of prophecy any longer or that they can reinterpret it as something different than it was in biblical times. For example, some teachers, some commentators, even some paraphrasers of the Bible replace the word prophecy when speaking of the New Testament gift of prophecy with the expression inspired preaching. I remember when Ken Taylor's Living Bible first came out, that's the first place I ever saw it, where it calls under the gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians.

It's replaced, and it was replaced, I think it's been changed back to prophecy now, but Ken Taylor originally had inspired preaching, whoever has the gift of inspired preaching. Well, inspired preaching, I guess, I guess prophecy is inspired preaching, but that rather changes our perception of what we're talking about here, because we could say any inspiring teaching, anything that makes me feel inspired when I hear it is, I could say that was inspiring, or I really believe God really anointed that man to preach that message, and hopefully that would be the case, because Peter said if anyone speaks, let them speak as the oracles of God. Yet, not all speak as prophets.

A prophet is not one who's just giving an inspiring sermon, or an anointed sermon. He's speaking, thus sayeth the Lord. And that kind of prophecy is often thought not to belong in the modern church.

They feel that that went out with the apostles, that went out with the first century. But actually, the early church for several centuries afterward, in the church fathers, they talk about having prophets in their church. So, they didn't think it went out in the first

century, though I must confess there are churches today that really do welcome that kind of prophecy, and I think they get a lot of false prophecy to tell you the truth.

Wherever there is prophecy welcomed, there is probably false prophecy as well. And John knew that too, in the early church. In fact, Paul knew that as well.

Judging prophets was necessary, because you had to judge whether they're real, giving a real word from the real Holy Spirit, or something else, either fake in it, or else perhaps inspired by a wrong spirit, another spirit, a demon. Because in 1 Corinthians 12, when Paul lists the gifts of the Spirit, he gives a list of nine of them here, he gives another list with some other ones in Romans 12. But as he's listing some of these gifts that are given to different church members, he says in 1 Corinthians 12, 10, to another is given the working of miracles, to another, prophecy, to another, discerning of spirits, to another, different kinds of tongues, to another, the interpretation of tongues.

Now, you saw a gift called discerning of spirits. Many people have told me they have the gift of discernment, but the Bible doesn't ever speak of a gift of discernment. Discernment is something the Bible says you develop through use of the Word of God.

That's what it says in Hebrews chapter 10. Solid food is for those of full age, who by reason of use of Scripture have their senses exercised to discern good from evil. Discernment is something that every wise person has.

In fact, discernment is simply wisdom, in a way, recognition of what's real and what's not. All Christians are supposed to have that. Paul doesn't talk about a special gift of the Spirit of discernment, but he talks about discerning of spirits.

And this word discerning, in 1 Corinthians 12.10, is the word diakrino, which means to distinguish. Distinguish between spirits. Now, I want to suggest to you that spirits here refers to prophetic utterances.

And also in 1 John chapter 4, do not believe every spirit. I believe it refers to prophetic utterances. It's not the way we would typically speak, but the biblical writers sometimes do speak of prophetic utterances as spirits.

They are utterances of spirits. Hopefully the Holy Spirit. But the discerning of spirits, or the judging, or the distinguishing of spirits, is a gift that is used in conjunction with prophecy itself.

We see that in 1 Corinthians 14 and verse 29. In verse 14, 29, Paul said, Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. This word judge is the same word as discern in the other passages.

Diakrisis, this is actually the verb form of the noun. One of the gifts of the Spirit is judging spirits, or judging prophetic utterances. And so when the prophets speak, others

should judge.

That is, use that gift of discerning of spirits, judging spirits. And by the way, if you'll notice a little further down, in 1 Corinthians 14, it said, the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. Now, normally, this is interpreted to mean that a person who has prophecy, that gift of his is subject to him so he doesn't have to blurt it out and so forth.

He can control himself. Now, I believe that is entirely true. I don't believe anyone who's got the true spirit of prophecy has got to blurt things out.

But the statement that the spirit of the prophets are subject to the prophets, I personally think that in the context of what Paul is saying is that any prophetic utterance that a prophet wants to give is subject to the judgment of the other prophets. He said, let the prophets speak two or three, and let the others, presumably the other prophets, judge. Because every individual utterance, spirit, is subject to the judgment of the prophets.

That is, the group of prophets of the church. This can be understood differently. But it's interesting that the same word is used, this judge, that is used in the gift of discerning of spirits.

And if you look back at chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians again, 1 Corinthians 12, 10, you'll notice in the listing, he says, to another prophecy, to another judging of prophecy, or discerning of spirits, to another tongues, to another interpretation of tongues. That is, there's companion gifts. With the gift of prophecy, you must also have someone who can discern whether a prophecy is real or not.

With the gift of tongues, you must have someone who can interpret whether tongues are what they're saying. And so, in 1 Corinthians 14, he says, let the tongues speak as two or three, but only if there's one to interpret. Let the prophets speak, but only if someone's judging.

You can't have prophecy without judging prophecy. You can't have tongues speaking without interpretation. So there are companion gifts.

And Paul argues that all prophecies, all prophetic spirits, should be judged. If you look just a moment over at 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, Paul begins that chapter saying, Now brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him, we ask you not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Now, don't be shaken up if you hear a spirit, a word, or a letter that purports to be from us.

A spirit is probably a prophetic utterance in the church that says, The day of the Lord has come. Don't believe it if you hear a spirit saying that. Or if you get a word from someone about that.

Or a letter that purports to be from me saying that. I wouldn't say such a thing, he says. Don't believe those things.

But notice he uses the word spirit here also, most commentators would agree, as a reference to a prophetic utterance or a spiritual utterance, a prophecy. Prophecies have to be discerned, judged. And therefore there is the gift of discerning of the prophecy, of the spirits.

And those spirits are subject to the prophetic judgment. Now, John, in our present passage, also submitted to judge prophecies or judge spirits. Don't believe every spirit.

I think that means don't believe every prophetic utterance. Now, the reason they would call that spiritual is because it was assumed that behind the prophetic utterance is an actual spiritual mind. And, of course, every Christian assumes it's the Holy Spirit that's speaking through them.

But John is aware there are false prophets giving false prophecies, obviously by a false spirit. In fact, he said it's the spirit of the Antichrist. And he says in verse 6, we have to know the spirit of truth from the spirit of error.

Once we become spiritual and become aware of spiritual things, we may be gullible, too, and think that everyone who says, thus saith the Lord, is really speaking from the Lord. One thing we can see from these statements about judging prophecy is gullibility is not a Christian virtue. God does not want people being gullible.

Some people think Christians are gullible because we believe things that the critics themselves don't believe. But actually, a Christian is not supposed to be gullible. The things I believe as a Christian, I believe because of good evidence.

I really wouldn't believe them if there wasn't good reason for it. And we're not supposed to just believe everything someone says if they say they're speaking from God. That's why it's proper even to judge the scriptures, because the scriptures were originally written by people who claimed to be speaking from God.

Fortunately, when you do judge the biblical books, you find they were. You find they predicted things that came true, and they had other ways in which they passed the test. If you look back at Deuteronomy, Moses, or more probably God through Moses, twice tells Israel how to discern between true prophecies from God and false prophecies that aren't from God.

Obviously, even in the Old Testament, this is an important thing to know. In Deuteronomy chapter 18, when he's been predicting that the Lord will send other prophets after Moses is gone, in verse 21 and 22, he says, and if you say in your heart, how shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken? That is, if it's a false prophecy, how will we know it's a false prophecy? And one test is given in verse 22.

When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken.

The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You shall not be afraid of him. So, if the thing that is predicted doesn't come to pass, it's a false prophecy.

The fulfillment of the thing predicted is one of the primary tests, of course, of whether the prophecy is reliable. If you look at Jeremiah 28.9, it says, As for the prophet who prophesies of peace, when the word of the prophet comes to pass, the prophet will be known as one whom the Lord has truly sent. So, again, how do we know if the prophet speaking is really sent from the Lord, is really speaking by the Spirit of God? Well, when the prediction he makes comes to pass, that's a good sign.

Because, generally speaking, people who are not inspired by some spirit or other do not know future things. And if you can predict something accurately and it happens, that's a pretty good confirmation. And that's one reason we know that the prophets who are our body were true prophets.

In their own day, some people questioned them. But, in retrospect, the Jews recognized these were true prophets because of what they said happened. And so they are included in the Bible because of that.

If you look back at Deuteronomy again, there's a second test of true prophecy given. In Deuteronomy 13, verses 1-3, it says, If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass. Now, here's a case that passes the test of chapter 18.

He says something's going to happen, and it does. So, at one level, he seems to have passed the first hurdle to be recognized as a true prophet. But, it says, If the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, Let us go after other gods, which you have not known, and let us serve them, you shall not listen to the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams.

For the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Now, this is interesting because there's also another way to know if a prophet is false, and that's if he's telling you to worship other gods. If he's representing something other than the true God as the proper object of worship.

In a sense, that's where John is coming from, when he says, every spirit that doesn't confess the truth about Jesus is not of God. Every spirit that doesn't confess the truth about Jesus, because it's misrepresenting Jesus, it's presenting a different Jesus. And, it's interesting how it reads in Deuteronomy 13, because he says the prophet in question actually does give a sign or a wonder that comes to pass.

That's pretty impressive. But then he's trying to get you to worship a wrong god. Well,

how do you explain to him that the sign or the wonder came to pass? We might think Moses should say, don't you realize that's a demonic spirit impersonating God's Holy Spirit? This is an evil spirit doing this work, this sign or this wonder, to get you to go off the trail.

And it may well be that it was. It may well be that every case of that is a case of an evil spirit. But that's not what Moses underscores.

He says the Lord your God is testing you. As God allows a false prophet to come into your midst, and even do signs and wonders, but his doctrine is corrupt. And he wants to lead you away from the true Christ and to the true God.

And in God allowing that, he's letting you be tested. He wants to see if you're loyal. He wants to see if you love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul or not, or if you'll go off after another god as soon as something tantalizing comes along.

Well, this is very interesting because, of course, that tells us something about God. I was asked today on the radio by someone who said, why did God allow Satan to exist? And I said, I think it's because he has use for him. The devil, God wants us to be tested.

And he's the tester. He's the tempter. And what happens is the devil seeks to allure us away from God.

And God allows it because the Lord your God is testing you to see if you love the Lord with all your heart or not. If you do, you won't go off after the devil. If you do go off after the devil, you fail the test.

And it's been revealed just how much you can or cannot be trusted to be a follower of Christ. And so God tested Israel that way with allowing false prophets, apparently perhaps demonically empowered false prophets who could do signs and wonders. The church today has people in its midst that are false prophets, and some of them even do give signs and wonders.

There are signs and wonders in some of the movements in the church today. Not all signs and wonders are to be rejected, but many of them should be. They should all be tested.

And when someone begins to tell you that there's some kind of miraculous thing happening in their church, or gold dust is appearing on the pages of their Bible during the service or something like that, or gold teeth are being, cavities are being filled with gold while they sit there in the congregation, or feathers of angels' wings are floating down from the sky while they're at church, you hear this kind of silly stuff. And you begin to say, well, exactly what are they teaching you about God? What are they teaching you about Jesus? At the very least, they're giving the impression that God is interested in a whole bunch of spectacular nonsense, which is a different God in a sense, too. Why

aren't they impressing you with the need for holiness and for obedience and for following faithfully after Christ instead of getting you dazzled and distracted by gold dust on your Bible page? What good is that? Why would God have any interest whatsoever in that? There are signs and wonders.

I don't know if they're supernatural or fake. Of course, some are fake. Some might be supernatural.

But in any case, don't be duped just because a spirit is at work. A spirit is speaking. Don't believe every spirit.

Test the spirits to see if they're of God. John said it. Moses warned the Jews the same thing in Deuteronomy.

And so testing the spirits is one of the most important things for Christians who actually operate in a spiritual place. Now, some of our churches aren't that spiritual. I mean, it's possible to start a church and run it like a machine.

You know, you've got a protocol, and you do the protocol, and you do it every Sunday, and it goes by. No disasters and no spectacular move of God either, but it functions. But normally the church is supposed to be where the Spirit of God is filling all the people, and they are worshipping God in the Spirit, and the gifts of the Spirit of one sort or another are involved.

Probably teaching and preaching would be the main gift that is functioning in a gathering like that. It should be. But perhaps prophecy too.

Once in a while. The early church knew of prophets in their church, and they judged them because they knew that the church lives not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. And if God had a word for them through the prophetic gifted ones in the church, they knew the church had to live by those words from God.

But if someone stood up and claimed to be speaking from God, saying, Thus saith the Lord, and were speaking by a different spirit, that would be poison to the church. The church was totally dependent on the Holy Spirit to give them instructions and life and so forth, and therefore it was absolutely urgent not to let some other spirit sneak by and give false instructions, because the church would just go astray. In the Didache, which as I said was written right around the turn of the first century, Didache is a Greek word that means teaching.

And the longer title is The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. No one claims the Twelve Apostles wrote the Didache, but the early Christians, either one or two generations after them, wrote it as sort of a compendium of church protocol and things like that, how to baptize, how to take communion, things like that, which the church followed and was

purportedly what the apostles had taught in their lifetime. Some of the things in here are kind of strange.

Some of them certainly go beyond scripture, and some arguably might even go against scripture. But it's interesting because it is an authentic and authoritative early church document that many Christians in the early days thought should be in the New Testament. It didn't make the cut because the apostles didn't write it.

But it was not a book that Christians ignored or didn't respect. And it actually tells us how they dealt with certain situations in the church. Let me read a little section here.

This is in the Didache. It says, Now concerning the apostles and prophets, deal with them as follows in accordance with the rule of the gospel. Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as if he were the Lord, but he is not to stay for more than one day unless there is need, in which case he may stay another.

But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle leaves, he is to take nothing except bread until he finds his next night's lodging. But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet.

Wow. They would not like a lot of our television evangelists today. If a man asks for money, he is a false prophet.

Also, do not test or evaluate any prophet who speaks in the Spirit, for every sin will be forgiven, but this sin will not be forgiven. However, not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet, but only if he exhibits the Lord's ways by his conduct. Therefore, will the false prophet and the prophet be recognized.

Furthermore, any prophet who orders a meal in the Spirit shall not partake of it. If he does, he is a false prophet. If any prophet teaches the truth, yet does not practice what he teaches, he is a false prophet.

But any prophet proven to be genuine, who does something with a view of portraying in a worldly manner the symbolic meaning to the Church, provided that he does not teach you that you have to do it yourself, is not to be judged by you, for his judgment is with God. I think probably that's a weird thing. Any prophet who speaks genuinely about his Spirit, apparently who has passed the test, if he does any worldly thing to try to symbolically represent God's Word to you, and he says, that's sketchy, but his judgment is with God, you can't condemn him for that.

He's probably referring to things like what Isaiah and Ezekiel did. Isaiah walked around naked for three years. That'd be pretty controversial if someone in our church did that.

But if this is a person who's really speaking by the Spirit, and he does something in a worldly manner that you're not sure what to think of it, withhold judgment, because his

judgment is with God, if he's been proven otherwise to be a true prophet. But notice, it's a strange word. I stumbled a little bit when it says at the beginning of that paragraph also do not test or evaluate any prophet who speaks in the Spirit.

For every sin would be forgiven but this sin. But how do you know if he speaks in the Spirit if you don't test or evaluate him? In fact, it goes on to say you do test him. So it must mean that after a man has been proven to be a prophet of God, speaking in the Spirit, you don't criticize him in general.

Not that you don't test his words. You always have to test somebody's words. But he does say that everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet but only if he exhibits the Lord's ways.

By his conduct, therefore, will the false prophet and the prophet be recognized. Now that test is not given to us here in 1 John in this verse, but he has been saying all the way through, whoever does not practice righteousness is not a god. If you look over at 2 Peter 2, beginning at verse 1, it says, But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.

And many will follow their destructive ways, because of them the way of truth will be blasphemy. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words. For a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction was not sluggish.

Now if you go on to read further down, it says these people are in it for the money, and it also says in verse 14, they have eyes full of adultery, they cannot cease from sin, and it goes on and describes their character primarily. It does say in the opening verses, they will teach destructive heresies, but the description of the prophets themselves and false teachers is largely a description of their life. They're in it for the money, they're in it for the immorality, and by the way, this has been proved true time and time again, with traveling evangelists and television evangelists and so forth.

I mean, Peter had so much foresight, he said you'll know these false teachers because of their behavior, and that's what the Didache said, their behavior is what's going to get them away. If they ask for money, they're a false prophet. If they stay longer than three days, they're a false prophet.

If they leave with anything more in their hand than bread, to get them to their next place, they're a false prophet. If they order a meal in the spirit, I can just picture this, this must have happened, the Didache wouldn't even give this as a scenario, unless some people were doing this. Thus saith the Lord, bring me prime rib, mashed potatoes, and lots of balls.

And so, okay, he can order that in the spirit, but he can't eat it. If he eats it, he's a false prophet. That's so strange.

You can see how many hokey things were done that had to be warned against to the early Christians, because wherever there's any kind of spiritual activity, there's weird activity, too. It's sometimes said that the first person who gets revived in a revival is the devil. He's the first one who wakes up.

And wherever the Holy Spirit's actually doing things that are supernatural, the devil's always nearby doing his counterfeit things that are supernatural to draw people out. And invariably, there's undiscerning people who believe every spirit. And John says, don't believe every spirit.

Test those spirits to see if they're God, because there are many false prophets gone out into the world. By the way, in 1 John 4, where it says, many false prophets have gone out into the world, Jesus, in the Olivet Discourse, said in Matthew 24, 11, he said, there will be many false prophets. And John has already said in chapter 2, little children, it is the last hour.

And he said, there are many false Christs, many antichrists have come. Jesus said there'd be many false Christs and false prophets. John is saying there are many false Christs.

Therefore, we know that it is the final hour. I believe this is some evidence that John was probably writing this earlier than it's usually attributed. Probably near that final hour before the destruction of Jerusalem, I would imagine.

In any case, he says there's a lot of false prophets, so you have to be discerning. Now, he says, verse 2, by this we know the spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses the right things about Jesus is of God.

In this case, that he's come in the flesh. And every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. That's the spirit of antichrist.

You need to watch out for that. You heard he was coming, he's already here. Now, we talked about antichrist in chapter 2. We won't get into that in detail now.

There was an extensive treatment of the antichrist in chapter 2, verses 18 through basically 23. But he's now saying these spirits, these antichrists speak by a spirit of antichrist, a demonic spirit of antichrist that speaks through them. And he says, you are of God, verse 4, little children, and have overcome them.

That is, you've overcome the evil spirits. Because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. He who is in the world is Satan.

And in you is Christ. And therefore, Christ being superior to Satan, you can overcome those evil spirits. If you remember back in chapter 2, in verses 13 and 14.

In chapter 2, at the end of verse 13, he says, I write to you little... No, not that one. In the middle of that verse, he says, I write to you young men, because you have overcome the wicked one. And then, at the end of verse 14, I have written to you young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.

The young adult Christians are commended for having overcome the wicked one. Now the little children are said to have overcome. He says, you are of God, little children, and have overcome them.

The spirit of Antichrist. These false spirits, you need to watch out for. Because you have Jesus in you, you don't have to be afraid of them.

There's never any reason to be afraid of demons. Unless you're compromising yourself. If you're morally compromised, I think your armor is down.

And if you don't have your armor on, then there's plenty to be afraid of. Because demons are not handy wastes for the most part. They're pretty mean critters.

But greater is he who's in you than he that is in the world. If you are walking in faith, if you're walking in righteousness, wearing the armor of righteousness, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, you've got that stuff on. Paul said you can withstand the evil one in the evil day.

And having done all, you can stand it. You will overcome him. And even these little children had already overcome that spirit of Antichrist.

They had come into their church. Remember, John's writing to an actual situation that was going on in the church. And that church was that some people had left the church already because they were defecting from Christ.

And he says, of those people, in verse 5, they are of the world, therefore they speak of the world, and the world hears them. We, apparently John and his company, or the apostles, are of God. He who knows God hears us.

He who does not know God does not hear us. So the false teachers are listened to by the world. They speak in terms the world appreciates.

The Gnostic teachers primarily taught antinomianism, which means you're saved by what you know, not by what you do. So go ahead and live it up. Sin all you want, because that doesn't matter.

It's what you know that saves you. And therefore they taught there's no moral rules.

Well, that's definitely speaking according to the desires of the world.

And the world listens to that kind of teaching. That attracts worldly people. But John teaches the opposite.

You need to live righteously. You need to follow Christ's commands. He says, we are of God, and we're speaking the truth, and those who are of God will hear us.

Those who are not of God don't hear us. And this is how you know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. The spirit of truth will always be speaking in accordance with what the apostles said.

The spirit of error will always be speaking contrary to what they say. That's how you know. Now, by the way, the spirit of truth is a term Jesus used in the upper room discourse for the Holy Spirit.

He said, I'm going to send you another parable, another comforter, who will dwell with you forever, even the spirit of truth, who is later in John 14 referred to as the Holy Spirit. So he's saying, this is how you know the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, apart from, and distinguished between that and a false spirit, a spirit of error, a demonic spirit. There is a spiritual warfare.

There are demonic spirits. We don't very often see tangible evidence of them in this country. Missionaries see it much more often in places like India and China and tribal regions of Africa and South America.

I, frankly, have run into it occasionally in this country, too, and that is demon possession. Now, he's not really talking about demon possession here, but demon possession is that manifestation of demons that becomes very obvious. When people don't believe in demons, all they need to do is meet a demon-possessed person, and especially if they happen to be there to see it cast out.

When they see that, as missionaries do all the time in these lands, there's people in the villages that everyone knows are demon-possessed. The witch doctors can't help them. People go berserk.

They do supernatural things. They levitate. They have clairvoyant powers.

Weird, weird stuff. And the missionary comes and says, I command you in the name of Jesus to come out. And the demon goes out.

When you see that kind of stuff, it just chokes you into reality. Oh, yeah, there are demons. But they're not always possessing people.

They're often doing things far more subtle and more invisible than that. And the thing they do the very most is not possess people, but deceive people. The devil's concern is

to deceive.

He's the one who deceives the whole world, it says in Revelation 12, verse 9. And that's what he does. He's a liar and the father of lies, Jesus said in John 8, verse 44. So the demons are deceiving spirits.

Paul said in 2 Timothy, in the last days men will be followers of deceiving spirits, seducing spirits. And so spirits will try to seduce you away from the truth. And you need to discern between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

False teaching is a great danger to the church if this false teaching is about Christ. Now, of course, false teaching about some things is less consequential. There are some things that Christians disagree about.

Some of them are right, some of them are wrong, but it hardly matters. But on issues of who Christ is and what our obligation is to him, true teachers and true prophets have got to speak the right thing, or else they'll do serious damage to the church. In verse 70, it says, 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. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him.

That's the true manifestation of love toward us. And this is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved God so loved us, we are also to love one another.

Now, when John says everyone who loves is born of God, in other words, everyone who loves is a Christian, does he mean that non-Christians never love anybody? That only Christians love? Well, usually the standard answer is, well, only Christians have agape love. Well, what is agape love? Well, that's the kind of love that Jesus had where he lays down his life for his friends. So do only Christians ever lay down their lives for their friends? Haven't some non-Christians done that kind of thing before? The answer is, well, yeah, but that's not really pure because they're doing it for selfish motives.

Well, how do you know that? Well, because of my doctrine, it tells me that. Well, but where did you get the doctrine? How do you know non-Christians never love? Now, a verse like this might give that impression. Anyone who loves is born of God, so presumably anyone who isn't born of God doesn't love.

But see, these kinds of statements in 1 John are made about all these texts. Whoever says that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. Whoever keeps his commandments is born of God.

Whoever loves is born of God. You need to take all of them together to make a

composite picture of who's really born of God. Because some people will confess that Jesus is the come of the flesh, but not really be a Christian.

A person can say the right things. A person can even live a moral life. A person can even truly love certain people, I think.

That's my assumption. But no one can do all those things unless they're really a Christian. A person who believes, who obeys, who loves, and who has the spirit.

Those are the four tests. Each one of them is presented as if it's a stand-alone thing. As in this case, whoever loves is born of God.

As if there's no other test. There are other tests. All four tests are in this sermon, and they all have to be merged.

So we just have to recognize that John does this. He talks that way. Every time he talks about one of these things, he acts as if it's the only thing.

But he expects you to remember what he said two verses earlier, a chapter earlier. He doesn't expect you to be that amnesiac. He wants you to remember that he's saying all these things are necessary tests.

But love is certainly one of them. Loving is absolutely essential to prove you're a Christian. And Jesus said, that's how all men will know you're my disciples.

If you have loved one for another. In John 13, 35. That's the real test that Jesus pointed to most.

And John leans on it pretty heavily here. Let's love one another for love is of God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

He who does not love doesn't know God. That much can be said. For God is love.

If you don't know love, you don't know God. Because God is love. Now this statement, God is love, is like two other statements in John's writings.

In 1 John, chapter 1, and verse 5, he said, This is the message which we have heard of him and declared to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. And then over in the Gospel of John. In John chapter 4, familiarly, John records the conversation Jesus had with the woman at the well.

And he says in John 4, 24, God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in the spirit. There are three statements that have that same construction in John's writing. God is spirit, God is light, and God is love.

This is John's theology of the nature of God. He is the spirit, he is light, and in him is no

darkness at all, and he is love. Those are seemingly the things that define God most essentially.

We can also say a lot of other things about God that are true. But these three things apparently say what is essential. What is the essence of God.

He is, of course, the creator. He is the spirit who created us. He is the light, and he is love.

And therefore you cannot walk in darkness and be in fellowship with God. You cannot fail to love and know God. You cannot know God if you are not born of the spirit.

Because God is spirit. So in order to have a relationship with God and know him, you have to be associated with him at his level in a certain sense. In these areas you have to be spiritual to worship in the spirit.

You have to be in the light and walk in the light to have fellowship with him, John says in chapter 1. And you have to love and you have to know love in order to know God. If you don't love, then you simply don't know God, no matter how much you know about God. Now, this love, of course, has to be directed toward God and toward man.

In this particular section he's talking about love toward man because he says, Beloved, let us love one another. And he tells us how much God loves man, including you and me. He said, In this the love of God was manifested toward us.

Verse 9. Here's how God proved or manifested his love toward man. He sent his only begotten son into the world so that we could live through him dying. This is similar to what Paul says in Romans 5, I think it's verse 8, where he says, But God demonstrated his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

The death of Jesus is given as the ultimate picture of what love is. John said this earlier in chapter 3 and verse 16. In 1 John 3.16 he says, which sounds a lot like John 3.16 when you say it.

But it's 1 John 3.16, he says, By this we know love because he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. Our lives are not more valuable than Christ's, and if he felt it fitting to lay down his life for the brethren, then we should lay down our lives for the brethren.

And so he says also in chapter 4 verse 10, In this is love, not that we love God. It's not that big a thing that we love God. Who wouldn't? He's lovable.

He's good. Who wouldn't love somebody good? If you find someone who doesn't love God, now there's a miscreant for you. There's someone out of touch with reality.

Someone who doesn't love the most lovable person in the universe. It's not exceptional

to love God. I mean, it may be unusual, but it's understandable that we would love God.

Who wouldn't? But this is where love is manifested. Not that we love God, but that he loved us. Now that's the inexplicable love.

Why would he love us? What did we ever do to be lovable to him? We just rebelled against him. We've just gone our own way. We've spent most of our lives ignoring his commands and his claims on our life and just doing what we preferred to do.

Why should he love a person like me? Or you? That's where love is seen. He does love us. And that's the marvel, John says.

It's a marvel. In chapter 3, in verse 20, he said, Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God. He's marveling that we would be called God's children by God himself.

What manner of love is that? It's an amazing thing that he would love us and send his son to be propitious for our sins. He says, in verse 11, Beloved, if God so loved us like that, we ought to love one another. In other words, if God loves you that way, then I'm going to love you that way.

Why? Well, for one thing, I'm supposed to be an imitator of God. Another thing is that he has demonstrated that he thinks you're worth that. And if he thinks it, how can I not think it? If he thinks you're worthy of his love, for some reason that he understands that I don't, then how can I assume that you're not worthy of my love? Is my love more valuable than his? Do I have a higher standard for who I'm going to love than he has? How dare I have such a higher standard for that? In verse 12, it says, No one has seen God at any time, but if we love one another, God lives in us.

He abides in us. And his love has been perfected in us. If we are loving each other, it's his love that's being perfected in us.

And that is a good consolation until we see him, for not having seen him. No one has seen him yet, but we can at least know him inwardly if we love one another. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us because he has given us of his spirit.

And of course, the fruit of the spirit is love. And Paul says in Romans 5-5, he says that the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We have the spirit and the spirit produces love in us and that's how we know we're Christians.

He says, And we have seen and testified that the Father has sent the Son as the Savior of the world. Now we must be John and others who have seen Jesus. Remember he opened the epistle that way.

That which we have seen and heard, which we have touched, which we have seen, which

we have handled. He says, Now we who have touched and handled, we testify that God sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. And whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God.

There's that doctrinal test, the first test we considered, we mentioned. And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him.

And love has been perfected among us in this, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment. Because as he is, so are we in this world. Now we're almost done tonight, but let me just think about that for a moment.

I think John is saying this, when we love one another, we in this world are like Jesus. He loves us from heaven. We are in this world and we are in this world like him, when we love like he does.

His love is perfected in us and this gives us boldness in the day of judgment. That is, when we stand before God, we don't have to be ashamed. He's already mentioned that shame element earlier in chapter 2. In chapter 2, verse 28, he says, And now, little children, abide in him, that when he appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed before him at his coming.

This apparently is something on John's mind. When Jesus comes, will we be ashamed? Will we have reason to be ashamed? We needn't. If we abide in him, if we walk in him, if we trust in him, if we love one another, if we are like him in this world, then we can be bold before him.

We don't have to be ashamed when he comes. We don't have to cower and cringe, fearing what he will think of us, because we know. We're loving each other and he likes that.

And we can boldly anticipate his coming without fear that he's going to somehow be very displeased with us. There will be people that Jesus will be displeased with. Remember he said, that servant who says, My master delays his coming and begins to eat and drink with the drunkards and beat his fellow servants.

He said that his master will come in a day he's not looking for him and will cut him in two and give him his portion with the hypocrites. That's not a pretty thing. Getting cut in two and giving your portion with the hypocrites.

That's going to happen to the servants who aren't abiding in him, who aren't loving their brothers, Jesus said. But if we love one another, we have boldness. Let him come.

I want him to come. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. If we are like him in this world, and we really should be, because people need to see him.

And as he said in verse 12, no one has seen God, but everyone wants to. And the best thing we can hope for is that they'll see him in us. That we will be like him.

So that as he is, so are we in this world. In that we love people like he does. And if we do that, then there will be nothing to fear from his coming.

We can have boldness. He says there's no fear in love. But perfect love casts out fear.

Because fear involves torment. Actually the word torment is the word colossus that means punishment. Fear involves punishment.

That is to say, if you're afraid of Jesus coming, it's because you're afraid of punishment. You're anticipating being punished. Now, if you love, you're not going to have that fear.

If you have perfect love for others, then it removes all basis for fear of any punishment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. If you still are not loving as you ought to love, then you probably will have reason to fear.

You will intuitively know that. I'm not ready for Jesus to come. I'm not ready to die.

I'm not ready to stand before God because I am not really doing what I should be doing. I'm not loving. But the more you love others, the more you have confidence that you are one of God's children.

Because that's the mark of his children. Then you can welcome your dad. You can welcome your brother back.

We love him because he first loved us. And by the way, the older manuscripts just say we love because he first loved us. The word him is in the Texas receiptus, but it's not in the Alexandrian text.

So, John might have said we love Jesus because he first loved us, and that would be true. But he might even be just saying we love because he first loved us. We love in general.

We have love in us because he loved us and we've received his love and send that love out to others too. Jesus actually said in John 13, 34, this is a new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you. He has loved me, therefore I have received love, and I'm supposed to give it out to others.

He loves me in the back door and I love others out the front door. Love each other as I have loved you. His love for me is first, then I love others.

We love because he first loved us, John says. Or we love him because he first loved us. It can be either way, different manuscripts read differently on that point.

Verse 20, if someone says I love God and hates his brother, he's a liar. John's pretty free

with his flinging around, he's a liar, he's a liar. If someone says he abides in him and doesn't keep his promise, he's a liar.

Who is a liar? He that denies that Jesus is the Christ. Here's another kind of liar. The person who says he loves God, but he doesn't love his brother, that's a liar talking.

For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God must love his brother also. You can't love God and not love your brother. But the reasoning John has there in verse 20, I have to admit, at one time it perplexed me.

When I was young, first reading that, I think he's got that backward. You ever think that way when you read that? It says if you don't love your brother whom you've seen, how can you love God whom you've not seen? Certainly it implies it's easier to love your brother whom you've seen than to love God whom you've not seen. And if you don't do the easier, you can't do the harder.

But I always thought, well, I think it's easier to love God than to love my brother. And the very reason is because I can't see God, but I can see my brother. It's harder to love my brother whom I've seen, because I can see all the things about him that are unlovable.

And yet God, you know, I can believe the best about him and never see any bad stuff about him, so it's easier for me to have affectionate thoughts about him. But that's just it. Love isn't just affectionate thoughts.

Love is laying down your life in service and sacrifice to somebody. Now, if you've got a brother in front of you who has needs, you can see visibly how to love. That person's needs are visible, and you can certainly show that you have love in you by doing something about it.

If you don't love the person that's visible, how can you love in a practical way God that you can't even see? You know, what can you do for him? If you're not doing what you can do for your brother who's right before your eyes, how can you be doing anything for a God that you can't even really lay your hand on, wherever he is? What can I do for him? What does he need from me? Loving God. All God needs from me is that I love my brother, really. I love God by loving my brother.

This is the commandment we have from him, that he who loves God must love his brother also, because that's what God says. So, my love for God is exercised by loving my brother, who God loves. You know, love me, love my dog.

If you love me, you've got to love my kids. And if you love John, you've got to love his kids. You've got to love who he loves.

And that's what he's saying. Now, if you say you love God, but you don't love his kids,

then that just doesn't make sense. That's not true.

You're a liar if you say that, John said. And so, it is. Now, he's going to open the next chapter, which we're not getting to tonight, by saying that very thing.

If you love the one who begot, you'll love everyone who's begotten of you. That is, if you love God, you're going to love his kids. If you love me, you'll love my kids.

Now, you might not like my kids much, but you're going to be concerned for them. If you see my kids in need, your love for me would make you do something on their behalf, knowing that that would bless me. I love them.

You love me, so you love what I love. And John says that is so with reference to our loving everyone that God loves. And who does God love? He loves everybody.

So, we have to love everybody, or else we don't love him. This is how John is reasoning, and he actually opens the next chapter with that very statement. And that chapter is going to go into some really wild places.

Some stuff I can't explain, even though I've been contemplating for over 40 years. Some of the things in chapter 5 are pretty difficult to know what to say. Like, free the bare witness on earth, the spirit in the water, and the blood.

What in the world does that mean? I'm afraid I can't help you on that. Neither can the commentators, judging from the ones I've read. They talk about it, but they bluff.

Frankly, I don't like when commentators bluff. When they know something has to be said about this, but they can't figure out what to say. Sort of like when Peter said, let's build three tabernacles.

One for Moses, one for Elijah, one for Jesus. He said it because he didn't know what to say. I think some commentators say what they say because they don't know what to say.

And it would have been better off saying nothing and not pretending that they know something. There's some stuff in 1 John 5 that's really difficult. But we'll worry about that when we come to it.

I'll just let you know if that's coming up next time.