

Sermon Series: Flourishing Fellowship with God: A Study in 1 John

Sermon Title: Flourishing Fellowship Tests the Spirits by Consistent Christian Confession and Conduct.

Scripture: 1 John 4:1–6 (cf. 3:1–24; 4:7–21)

Pre-Introduction: Everyday tests

Main Introduction: The context surrounding 4:1–6 gives us a third test by which we can test the spirits: the Christian conduct of love, at which we will look briefly. In our text today, we will see two other tests: the test of true Christian confession about Christ and the test of one's audience.

Sub-Introduction: Thompson has reminded us of the importance of understanding the context for our text today: "People met in houses in groups of about twenty or thirty people, for worship and fellowship (compare 2 John 10). These scattered communities did not have immediate authoritative figures like the Elder, and communication with them was not always easy. Apparently the Elder sent emissaries to communicate with the churches (3 John 5–8), sometimes carrying letters such as these epistles. These congregations had been glad to welcome the Elder's traveling ambassadors. But now there were also 'false prophets' who, like emissaries of the elder, would have claimed to speak the truth under inspiration of the Spirit. And, finally, there were various itinerant philosophers who traveled in hopes of a hearing and a place to stay in light of this complex situation, John is anxious to provide his readers with criteria against which claims to truth and inspiration could be tested."¹

Need: Discernment

Subject: Spirits (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:29; Galatians 1:8–9; 2 Corinthians 11:12–15; Ephesians 6:10–18)

Biblical idea: John exhorted believers to **test** the spirits based upon true Christian confession and conduct.

Outline of the Text:

- Christian **love** harmonizes with truth (3:1–24).
 - God's wondrous love has created a hope that purifies (vv. 1–3).
 - God's children do not continue sinning (vv. 4–10).
 - God's children follow the love of Christ not the hatred of Cain (vv. 11–17).
 - God's children love in accordance with the truth (v. 18–24).
- Christian **confession** about Christ distinguishes between spirits (4:1–6).
 - The command to test the spirits (v. 1a–b).
 - Gary Burge wrote in his introduction to this section, "One essential idea is presupposed throughout this passage: Two spirits are active in this world, 'the Spirit of truth' and 'the spirit of falsehood' (4:6). That is, there is the Spirit who

¹ Thompson, *1–3 John*, 112.

comes from God, who glorifies and elevates his Son, Jesus Christ (John 16:14), and there is the spirit of antichrist (1 John 4:3), which is welcomed by the world (4:5) and sabotages the truth about Jesus (4:2).”²

- The cause for testing the spirits (v. 1c).
 - Emphasis on deception rather than possession in this context.
 - Remember again what Thompson had to say about the context of the early church meeting in small groups in houses. Burge comments that the church at this time didn’t have the benefit of later doctrinal formulations like the Nicene Creed. He goes on, “No one owned a ‘New Testament,’ and at best the early Christians only had random collections of letters from the apostles and collections of stories about Jesus. Therefore oral communication was essential. Churches relied on emissaries from their leaders, who relayed information from other communities and taught . . . But problems came when prophets or teachers arrived claiming an authority that was not rightfully theirs. Paul had to address the problem of unauthorized teachers in Galatia and Thessalonica (cf. 2 Th. 1:5–12). Because some churches received false letters (see 2 Thess. 2:2), he even decided to sign his correspondence with recognizable markings (Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17). This phenomenon meant that churches could fall prey to unscrupulous itinerant prophets and teachers, and John’s churches were no exception (cf. 2 John 7). Consequently, Christians had to be ready to assess the message they heard and the spirit that inspired it.”³
- The content of the confessions of the two spirits is the first test (vv. 2–3).
 - Emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s knowledge of Christ in prophecy (1 Peter 1:10–12), in Christ’s baptism, temptation, ministry, transfiguration, cross, resurrection, and in the Spirit’s having been sent by the ascended Christ. The Holy Spirit knows how to apply Christ’s love in the fellowship of believers, so that they experience one another’s Spirit filled affection.
 - The spirit of antichrist is marked by worldliness – its desires, its pride, its consistency with a world system in both open and deceptive hostility toward God and his program. It is marked by hatred for the church, not love. It is marked by a deceptive confession about Christ, not a biblical or historic one. To test this spirit’s confession about Christ, keep asking the right questions.
 - Some passages that may help us discern the Holy Spirit’s voice from the spirit of the antichrist concerning Jesus Christ are the Christological Psalms (22, 110); Isaiah 53; John 1:1–18; Romans 10:9–10; 1 Corinthians 8:4–6; 1 Corinthians 12:1–3; 2 John 7.

² Burge, *Letters of John*, 172–73.

³ Burge, *Letters of John*, 173–74.

- While Burge is correct that there were no formal creeds like those that would come later in church history, I do think the New Testament demonstrates the creedal preaching of the apostles as they accurately taught about Christ from his example in Luke 24 – preaching the Christ from the (OT) Scriptures. This is why in their New Testament writings we come across statements that are creed-like confessions about true Christology (e.g., 1 Cor. 8:6; 15:3–7; Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; 1 Pet. 3:18–19; 1 John 4:2).
- The confidence in the testing of the spirits (v. 4).
 - Recall his previous uses of “little children”:
 - 1 John 2:1 – The readers, without distinction, were called “little children.” They are capable of not sinning, but if they sinned, they had an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous one.
 - 1 John 2:12 – They have been forgiven (extensive perfect, a completed past act that created a state that extended into the present) for the sake of Christ’s name (cf. 2:1–2, 6). The exact construction διὰ τὸ ὄνομα in the New Testament is found 6 out of 7 times in a context where persecution is implied: “You will be hated because of my name” or something similar in Matt. 10:22; 24:9; Mark 13:13; Luke 21:17; John 15:21; Rev. 2:3. However, John’s usage here is more typical of the Greek Scriptures of the Old Testament, where the phrase is used in context of God’s actions toward his elect people for the sake of his holy reputation or for the honor of his name: 1 Sam. 12:22; 2 Chr. 6:32; Is. 60:9; Jer. 14:21; Ezek. 36:21–22; 39:25.
 - 1 John 2:28 – The readers are called “little children” in the context of John’s command to abide in Christ so that they will have confidence and not shame at his second coming.
 - 1 John 3:7 – John used “little children” to warn the readers to practice discernment regarding those who practice righteousness and those who practice unrighteousness.
 - 1 John 3:18 – The “little children” are commanded to learn that love is not simply a matter of word and tongue, but a matter of work and truth.
 - 1 John 4:4 – Here in our text today, the “little children” have their birth in God, and for this reason, the one in them is greater than the evil one who is in the world.
 - 1 John 5:21 – “Little children” must guard themselves from idols.
 - Thompson reminds us that our victory, our overcoming, is not the result of our own efforts, but the power provided by one who is greater than the one who is in the world. She also shares that this struggle between truth and error does not take place in a world “far above and beyond human beings. Hence this is also a human struggle, a conflict between the commitments of one group of people with those of another group.

- The contrasted audiences of the two spirits is the second test (vv. 5–6).
 - The world – those loyal to the hostile system in open rebellion against God and his Christ
 - The church – those loyal to the New Testament’s doctrine about Christ and demonstrate it through Christian love

Transition: Thompson offers a wonderful summary at this point:

- We are called on as a corporate community to test the spirits.
- It is crucial to remember what we are called on to test.
- We are called on to discern what is central to Christian faith and doctrine.
- Christian **conduct** matures in Christ-like love (4:7–21).
 - The Christ-centered command (4:7–12)
 - The perfect provision of love (4:13–21)

Theological Tension: Discernment of spirits is a preventative spiritual **gift** given to the church to protect it from deception. “Our society prizes religious tolerance and pluralism to such a degree that many of us have begun to believe that such ‘testing’ betrays a narrowness of vision that is overly critical, even judgmental.”⁴ But remember the testimony of the Bereans in the book of Acts, who tested the words of the apostle Paul to see whether or not the things he taught were true: “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11 [ESVi](#)).

Theological Truth: The Holy Spirit’s presence is always **verifiable**. The gift of the Spirit related to this comes from a word that means, the ability to distinguish and evaluate, *distinguishing, differentiation* of good and evil.”⁵ It is also used in Hebrews 5:14. Those who are able to verify have experience with the Spirit and the Scriptures in discerning good and evil, truth and error.

Theological Purpose: To demonstrate how Christian confession and conduct bring **clarity** to discerning spirits.

Make It Personal: Test the **spirits** by consistent Christian confession and conduct.

- Test the spirits that hold **influence** over you.
 - In **you**
 - In **leaders**
 - In **influencers**
- Test the spirits in **four** ways: “The Gold Method”
 - The test of **love**: Is it markable?
 - The test of **Scripture**: Is it identifiable?

⁴ Burge, *Letter of John*, 177.

⁵ [BDAG](#), s.v. “διακρίσις,” 231.

- The test of maturity: Is it heavy?
- The test of the trained eye: What do the experts say?