1 John Chapter 4

Introduction: John has been giving us tests we can use to check whether we are God’s children.

One test is that we will not make a practice of sinning if we have been born of God.

Likewise, we will believe in Jesus and love our brother. By doing these things we will assure our hearts before God.

In the first six verses of this chapter John injects the subject of the spirit and of testing in order that we may remain in fellowship with God and not be led astray.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

QUESTION: What word could rightly be used in verse on instead of “spirit” to give us the meaning we need to understand from this verse?

ANSWER: Teacher!

The sense of the admonition is, “Refrain from believing every teacher who claims to be from God, but prove (test) them and see whether or not they really are from God.”

This warning was especially needful at the time because Asia Minor generally, and Ephesus particularly, was rampant with magic and mysticism, heresy and error, and the advocates of each cult claimed supernatural direction and aid. Affecting to be led by the power of God, they sought to support...
their theories in the same fashion, and by the same claims as false teachers today.

William Barclay on page 89 of his commentary makes an interesting statement concerning the spirit. He first says, “In the early church there was a surging life of the Spirit which brought its own perils.” He goes on to say, “In the early church the spiritual world was very near.” All the world believed in a universe thronged with demons and spirits. Every rock and tree and river and grove and lake and mountain had its spiritual power; and these spiritual powers were always seeking entry into men’s bodies and minds. In the time of the early church all men lived in a haunted world and men were never so conscious of being surrounded by spiritual powers.

QUESTION: Who is told to test or prove the spirits or teachers?

ANSWER: Beloved ..... or in other words each individual!
Not some official head or body, etc.

QUESTION: How were they able to prove or test the spirits or teachers?

Guy N. Woods - - Gospel Advocate Commentary, pg. 287.

“The reader of the Epistle were thus admonished to “prove” the spirits, run an assay on them as a metallurgist does his metals, and determine whether they were of God. This, they were able to do, either by exercising miraculous power in the discernment of spirits (1Cor. 12: 4-11), or by comparing the claims of these men with the known teaching of the Holy Spirit through properly accredited representatives. (See comments of 1John 2:27ff.) There were undoubtedly a wide diffusion of spiritual gifts during the miraculous age of the church in order to supply the deficiency obtaining in the
absence of an infallible, documented report of the Spirit’s teaching such as we have in the New Testament today.”

- The exhortation here is one of discernment.
  o He says .... “Do not believe every spirit.”

- There are two great contrasting powers at work in the world.
  o 1. The Spirit of God – Truth (v.2, 6)
  o 2. The spirit of error – antichrist (v.3, 6)

- Our relationship with God is manifested not only by what we do (righteousness and love), but also by our doctrine (what we believe)

- This testing or discerning the spirits in this context has a direct application to the Gnostics’ ………… but the principle applies also to modern error.

- The second part of verse one says ..... for many false prophets have gone out into the world.
  o This points to ...... The need for discernment.

**QUESTION:** There is much error and confusion in the religious world today ...... so this need of testing or discernment is still evident. What is our responsibility in that regard?

- Everyone has an opinion .... But the real question is, do we have a sound scriptural basis for our opinions.
  o 2 Tim. 2:15 .... Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (RSV)

  o Acts 17:11 .... They were noble, eager and diligent .... Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received
the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. (RSV)

- **We have an obligation to do our own searching.**

  - 1Tim. 5:17 …. This is directed to elders specifically but it would be good for all of us: Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching. (1901 ASV)

- **It should be a labor of love.**

  - Hebrews 5:11-14 …. No growth! We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (NIV)

- **Apostasy is just a generation away.**

  - 2Tim. 3:16-17 …. We can know the things that are freely given to us of God …….. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works. (KJV)

- A complete and all sufficient revelation from God that is able to meet all our needs.
Jude 1:3 .... We can’t defend or contend for a faith we don’t have or don’t know ..... Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (RSV)

2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already. 4 Little children, you are of God, and have overcome them; for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. 5 They are of the world, therefore what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

- We see here first .... The means of discernment.
  - Do they acknowledge that Jesus Christ came in the flesh?
- Verses 2 through 4 keys on the false doctrine of the Gnostics of John’s day.
  - They in their teaching were denying that Jesus came in the flesh.
  - By teaching this they were identified with the spirit of the antichrist and then consequently declared to be “not of God.”
  - The implied question is asked ...... who listens to them?
  - And verse 5 gives answer ...... They are of the world, therefore what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them.
• The next implied question asked is ….. To whom do you listen?

• And verse 6 gives answer ….. We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

- Secondly we see … The result of discernment.
  o You are from God, little children. (v. 4a)
  o You have overcome them. (spirit of antichrist, false prophets) (v. 4b)

    ▪ Overcome here ….. points to a sharp distinction between the saints and the false teachers.

  o They had overcome the false teachers ….. by refusing to listen to their false doctrines.

  o And what was the reason? Because the one (God) in you is greater than the one who is in the world. (v. 4c)

    ▪ 1 John 5:19 …. We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. (RSV)

**Question:** Verse 6 says ….. We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (RSV)

What thoughts come to mind as you think about this verse?

**Answer:** John 8:47 says ….. He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.” (NIV….. this is Jesus speaking)

One who knows God recognizes God’s truth when it is preached, and hears it gladly; whereas one who is not of God hears it not.
• This is the reason why some consider some sermons as uninteresting and dull, as others regard the same efforts as highly interesting and inspirational.

- **1 Cor. 1:23-25 gives some additional insight .....**
  but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. (NIV)

- **The disposition of the person becomes evident in their attitudes and responses to the gospel.**
  - The “spirit of truth” appears to be a disposition favorable toward the truth.
  - The “spirit of error” appears to be a disposition friendly to error.

- **Sadly….so many times .....** We want to believe what we want to believe.

**Question:** Why was this teaching so destructive and how did they overcome them?

**Answer:** Because our security is in God’s power .... Through Christ!

- **Hebrews 2:10-18 .....** In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.” And again, “I will put my trust in him.” And again he says, “Here am I, and the children God has given me.” Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a
merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (NIV)

We must cling to His word and abide in Him.

- John 8:31-36 ..... 31 Jesus therefore said to those Jews that had believed him, If ye abide in my word, then are ye truly my disciples; 32 and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. 33 They answered unto him, We are Abraham’s seed, and have never yet been in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? 34 Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Every one that committeth sin is the bondservant of sin. 35 And the bondservant abideth not in the house for ever: the son abideth for ever. 36 If therefore the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed. (1901 ASV)


- Again ...Verse 2 says ..... 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God,

- He says ....“Here is the answer to the problem. John presents the positive evidence for recognizing when a prophet is inspired by the Spirit of God. The test is the confession of faith made by the person who claims to be inspired by the Spirit. The wording of the confession is similar to that in 2 John 7. The emphasis lies on the Word became flesh (John 1:14). There was a true union of the divine Word, the Son of God, with a human personality in Jesus Christ. With the NIV rendering, the stress is more on belief in the fact of the incarnation as a historical event; with the alternative rendering, the stress is rather on the human “state” of Jesus, and indeed on his continuing human state. The incarnation was not a temporary event but the permanent union of God and man in Jesus Christ. Moreover, to say that Jesus Christ came “in the flesh” is to say that he
was truly united with human flesh rather than that he merely came into a human body and indwelt it (possibly only for a limited period). We should no doubt take “has come” as a verb implying the coming of Jesus Christ from God; the pre-existence of Jesus Christ before the incarnation is presupposed.

- The message that they had heard from “the beginning.”
- The message that pointed back to the “apostolic We.”
  - This is the message they were to listen to …. so they would not be misled. Their salvation depended on it.

  ▪ This is the same instruction Paul gave to the Corinthians ..... 1 Cor. 14:37-38 .....
    37 If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. 38 If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. (NIV)

  ▪ Or as the ASV has it ....... 37 If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you, that they are the commandment of the Lord. 38 But if any man is ignorant, let him be ignorant. (1901 ASV)

  ▪ Also Philippians 3:17-19 .... Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. 18 For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. (NIV)

7 Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. 9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
John “the apostle of love” has before in this letter told us the importance of brotherly love:

- Love is an essential quality of brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Without the existence of this love it is concluded that, that person is not even acquainted with God, has never known Him and thus never genuinely converted.

At this point I’d like to key on the phrase “God is love” which is used twice in the text under consideration.

- This is a phrase that is often misused to justify a lot of false teaching.
- But if we can comprehend even a little of the meaning behind this phrase I think we’ll be greatly blessed.

- God is love because love originates with him ..... He is the very essence of love .... and only those who truly love are born of him (vs. 7)
  - This definition was not designed to be exhaustive.
  - From John we learn that:
    - God is light.
    - And Spirit.

- He is also a great many other things .... such as:
  - Power ..... Wisdom ..... and Goodness.

- It is impossible for man to apprehend the divine nature.
  - Love is a characteristic of his nature:
    - It follows that all who partake of his nature acquire the characteristic of love. (They are walking in the light ..... and abiding in the faith)
      - In its absence, sonship itself is wanting.
On this phrase “God is love” I’d like you to consider the following comments by William Barclay and then give me your thoughts on what he has to say.

“In this passage there occurs what is probably the greatest single statement about God in the whole bible, that GOD IS LOVE. It is amazing how many doors that single statement unlocks and how many questions it answers.

1. **It is the explanation of CREATION.** Sometimes we are bound to wonder why God created this world. The disobedience, and the lack of response in men is a continual grief to him. Why should he create a world, which was to bring him nothing but trouble? The answer is love; he cannot exist in lonely isolation. Love must have someone to love and someone to love it.

2. **It is the explanation of FREE-WILL.** Unless love is a free response it is not love. Had God been only law he could have created a world in which men moved like automata (robots), having no more choice than a machine. But, if God had made men like that, there would have been no possibility of a personal relationship between him and them. Love is of necessity the free response of the heart; and, therefore, God, by a deliberate act of self-limitation, had to endow men with free will.

3. **It is the explanation of PROVIDENCE.** Had God been simply mind and order and law, he might, so to speak, have created the universe, wound it up, set it going and left it. There are articles and machines which we are urged to buy because we can fit them and forget them; their most attractive quality is that they can be left to run themselves. But, because God is love, his creating act is followed by his constant care.

4. **It is the explanation of REDEMPTION.** If God had been only law and justice, he would simply have left men to the consequences of their sin. The moral law would operate; the soul that sinned would die; and the eternal justice would inexorably hand out its punishments. But the very
fact that God is love meant that he had to seek and save that which was lost. He had to find a remedy for sin.

5. It is the explanation of the **LIFE BEYOND.** If God were simply creator, men might live their brief span and die forever. The life, which ended early, would be only another flower, which the frost of death had withered too soon. But the fact that God is love makes it certain that the chances and changes of life have not the last word and that his love will readjust the balance of this life.

- **From the verses that follow his first statement that “God is Love” (vs. 8) we see the extent and the nature of God’s love for us.**

- **Consider the following:**

- **Vs. 9 .....** In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. *(KJV)*

  - His only Son *(RSV)*
  - His one and only Son *(NIV)*
  - His unique Son *(McCord)*

- Whatever else the term “only begotten Son” might mean it certainly means that Jesus Christ is in a relationship to God in which no other person ever stood or ever will stand.

  - One of a kind.
  - He alone can show men what God is like.
  - He alone can bring to men God’s grace, love, forgiveness and strength.

- **Vs. 10 .....** In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. *(RSV)*

  - God loved us before we loved him.
  - While we were yet sinners.
  - The gift of God’s son was the highest possible manifestation of love.
• **He was the** ..... Propitiation for our sins.
  o **The** ..... *Atoning sacrifice* to be offered.
• **This required** ..... *A Priest* to offer the victim.
  o **He was both the atoning sacrifice and the priest.**

  ▪ He bridged the awful gulf between God and man.
  ▪ The propitiation makes it possible for all men to be saved. *(Propitiation = *A sacrifice of atonement*)

**Question:** Verse 11 tells us “if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

In light of this example what should characterize our love of one another?

**Answer:** *Sacrificial love* - *a giving love.*

• **God's love gave** ..... *it was a love that held nothing back.*
  o He loved us in such measure as to give the priceless treasure of heaven as a sacrifice to die in our stead.
• **Unmerited love** - *not necessarily just in response to being loved.*
  o Actions measure our love and obedience – see Matthew 25:31-46
  o Not necessarily deserved by the receiver.
Question: Can I express this kind of love toward my brother and still disagree with him? Discipline him? (Does God?)

Answer: Certainly!

Hebrews 12:5-11 ..... And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons? — “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. 6 For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” 7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (RSV)

12 No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Question: Why do you think John mentions that no man has beheld God at any time?

Answer: He seems to be building up to 1 John 4:20 ..... 20 If any one says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.

It seems as though John is referring to our brethren as being our only chance to express the love we have for God.

And how does “God abide in us?” ..... Loving our brother is one way to bring God into contact with our lives.

And how is “his love perfected in us?” ..... There is no way we can love God perfectly except through learning to love our brother.
By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit.

- This statement is in defense of the apostles and the message they preached.
  - John was making the same argument in chapter 3:24.
- It is clear that this is the case because of what he says in the next verse:

  And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.

- No one living today can make the claim of this verse.
  - This is apostolic testimony to the sending of Jesus to be the Savior of the world.
- No one living today has seen Christ and there are no living eyewitnesses that can testify that God sent Christ to be Savior of the world.
  - Verse 14 points to the eyewitness testimony of the apostles … the inspired teachers. (As opposed to the false Gnostic teachers.)
- This is the exact thing promised by Christ to the apostles in John 15:26-27 ….. But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; 27 and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning. (RSV)

1 John 4:13 & 14 is a reflection of the premise of the book as stated in chapter 1:1 – 5:

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—2 the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 And we are writing this that our joy may be complete. 5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all (RSV)
15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

- Verse 15 points out that the confession of Jesus, as the Son of God is absolutely essential to the faith.
- Do we have so called “Christians” today that deny that Jesus is the Son of God? Examples?
  - Without Jesus we are without hope in the world.
  - He is the foundation of our faith.

16 So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.
17 In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world.

- We know and rely upon the love God has for us.
- We can have boldness (confidence) in the Day of Judgment.
  - As the word of truth – the gospel – is received, and allowed to motivate and influence our lives we enjoy the abiding presence of the Spirit.
  - The Spirit prompts love for others through the instruction, which he has given in the scriptures. (Through inspired apostles and teachers then – through the written word/Bible now.)

- Notice again the last part of this verse….. because as he is so are we in this world. (Instruction given in the scriptures)
There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.

- At least two facts are very evident here:
  1. Perfect love casts out fear.
  2. If we do not love our brethren, we cannot love God (v. 20).

- In loving God and our brethren we can have confidence that we will not be condemned at the last day.
- The more we increase in love and perfect it, the less we have to fear that in the last day we will be found wanting.
  o Love expresses itself in service to others.
  o He is saying the brother, visible and near at hand is the best test of our love.
  o It is a matter of responding to God’s love by passing it on to others.
  o They or we resemble Christ in this respect.
  o Certainly ..... He will not condemn those who strive to make themselves like Him.

- Confidence excludes fear: and since those who love have confidence, they have no fear.
  o Fear and respect – yes.
  o But not a dreaded terror.
Question: Why do you think John keys on this idea of loving the brethren so much?

Answer: The false teachers (Gnostics) must have been quite lacking in this area and it must have shown.

  o Remember …. They came out from them. (2:19)

  o It was evidence of where their message came from.

John 13:34-35 .... A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. 35By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (KJV)

What may we conclude?

A. That God is love.

B. That we (as His children) ought to have His nature and love as He did.

C. That we will express this perfect love by:
   1. Loving our brother.
   2. Casting out fear and becoming bold.

D. That Jesus came to save the world, but we must confess Him in order to have God abiding in us and us in Him.