

TEST THE PROPHETS AND LOVE THE BELIEVERS

Please do not read these comments until you have read the Scriptures for this lesson. Begin by letting the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Summary and Historical Background

Most conservative scholars agree that the apostle John spent his later years ministering in the area of Ephesus. It is most probable that the epistles of John were penned by him from this area around A.D. 85-95. First John was published as a circular letter to be read in the churches of Asia Minor (including the churches which he addressed in Revelation 2 and 3).

John stated his primary purposes for writing the letter in chapter one (1:3, 4). The themes of fellowship and joy occur throughout the book. John also wrote the book to attack heresies about the person of Christ that were being disseminated at this time. From the material that is found in the early verses of chapter four it seems likely that one of these heresies under attack was Docetism, a doctrine based on the antithesis between spirit and matter as taught in Gnosticism. The term Docetism comes from the Greek verb, *dokein*, "to seem to be." The teachers of the heresy taught people that Christ did not actually have a flesh and blood body – it only seemed like He had one. Instead, it was like a theophany (appearance of God) in the Old Testament. John began his epistle by saying, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes...and our hands have handled, of the word of life."

In chapter four John gave the means by which Christians could try the spirits (vv. 1-6). He also addressed the theme of brotherly love (vv. 7-21).

I The Purity of Fellowship Maintained – 4:1-6

A. The Command to Test the Spirits – 4:1

4:1 – True fellowship has its base in doctrinal unity. This has been the case since the inception of the Christian church, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). There are certain doctrines that are germane to the Christian faith without which there is no true Christianity. One of these cardinal doctrines is Christology (the doctrine of Christ). Unless fellowship is centered on the Christ of the Bible, that fellowship is vain. There are many groups today (as in John's time) that preach "another Jesus" who is not the Christ of the Bible.

John's command to these believers was two-fold: (1) "Believe not every spirit," and (2) "try the spirits." "Believe not" means a Christian must not be gullible and believe all the claims made by "spirit-led" people. Some people are spokesmen for false spirits and they are not worthy of the believer's faith.

The word translated "try" (KJV) is to test and means basically "to discern by examination." It is critical for Christians to be well informed on the doctrine of sound Christology. Virtually every cult in some way alters the doctrine of the person of Christ. John says the reason for testing the spirits is that many false prophets have gone out into the world. The cults and isms are usually the fastest growing groups in the world. Christians must be careful not to believe their messages even though they are growing rapidly. They must learn to test the doctrine of the spirits and not the popularity of the spirits. A crucial doctrine for testing is in the area of the person of Jesus Christ. What do they say about Christ?

B. The Criteria for Testing the Spirits – 4:2-3

4:2 – “Confesses” – In the introduction to the Study Notes it was mentioned that the heresy to which John was speaking of was probably Docetism. The test for knowing if someone was of the Holy Spirit and not of the spirit of Docetism was by his public confession. If he openly confessed that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh he was of the Spirit of God and not of Docetism. No Docetist could say that.

4:3 – “Every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God.” He is fully God and He is fully man. It was foretold in Isaiah 7:14 that Christ (Messiah) would truly be God and man. It says, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” His name says He is God, It means, “God with us” (Mt. 1:23). The prophecy also said that Christ would be born of a virgin. That means He also would truly be human.

“Come in the flesh.” Christ (God) would come in the flesh (man).

“Is come” is in the perfect tense which means the act was done, but the results continue. He became the God-man two thousand years ago and He continues to be that unique person. He will always be the God-man.

C. The Contrasts Involved in Testing the Spirits – 4:4-6

In this passage the Apostle John delineates some basic contrasts that should be understood in testing the spirits. John informs his people that there is the Spirit of truth and also the spirit of error (4:6).

4:4-5 – The first contrast involves the **sources** of these spirits. The Spirit of truth that is in the little children (the believers) is from God. John said of the believers, “You are of God” (4:4). On the other hand, the spirit of error that is in the false prophets is from the world which is ruled by Satan. John said, “They are of the world” (4:5); and that Satan “is in the world” (4:4). The world refers to the system of which Satan is the chief (cf. Ezk. 28:1-19; Mt. 4:8-9; Eph. 2:2).

4:4-6 – The second contrast involves the **subjects** of these spirits. The spokesmen who are controlled by the Spirit of truth are identified in three ways, and those who are controlled by the spirit of error also are identified in three ways. So then, spokesmen of the truth are identified, first of all, as overcomers (4:4). They have gained the victory over the devil and his false prophets. Second, they are indwelt by the Spirit of God: “Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world” (4:4). Third, they receive the truth that John preached: “He that knows God hears us” (4:6). This reception of sound doctrine is evidence that they are controlled by the Spirit of truth.

Spokesmen of error, on the other hand, are identified, first of all, as those that speak in accord with the world (4:5). The world is marked by the “lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (2:16), and those who speak along these three lines are worldly. For instance, those prophets who preach a salvation by works are worldly because they are making their appeal to the pride of life. This then is the first mark of a false prophet. The second mark is that the world hears them (4:5). When a preacher has the acclaim of the world and his message is acceptable to them, without any change in their lives, it is quite certain that he is a spokesman of error. The third mark is their unwillingness to listen to sound doctrine. Anyone who has spent much time dealing with cult members can testify that they rarely are interested in hearing the truth. They primarily want to spread their errors.

II. The Maturity of Fellowship Attained – 4:7-21

A. The Source of Mature Fellowship – 4:7-10

4:7 – “Love” (agape) - Though pure doctrine is necessary to give Christian fellowship unity and strength, it also needs brotherly love to give it vitality and warmth. Jesus commended the Pharisees for their orthodoxy but condemned them for their cold-hearted practices (Mt 23:2ff). It is possible for an organization to be a bastion of orthodoxy and yet be cold as stone. It needs love.

There are three primary words for love in the Greek language: **eros**: basically a sensual, sexual love; **philia**: a mutual love among friends; and **agape**: a divine, self-sacrificial love. Someone has said that **eros** takes; **philia** takes and gives; and **agape** gives.

Agape love is not natural to fallen man. This love is the fruit of a Spirit-filled life. The only source of this love is God. Only the children of God are able to express this love and they can only do it when they yield their lives to the Spirit's control and draw upon His power.

The key element in attaining mature fellowship among believers is the expression of **agape** love for one another. There is no fellowship among believers without love. **Philia** love will produce some fellowship, but **agape** love will produce mature fellowship. When John uses **agape** love, he is speaking of the love described in 1 Corinthians 13.

4:8 – “He that loves not” – The apostle uses a present participle which indicates continuous action. John is saying that the one not loving others is not born of God.

“Knows not” – This is an aorist which indicates he never knew God in a personal way so that he was born again.

“God is love” – The essence of God is love. It is not sentimental love, but holy love. It is not selfish love, but self-sacrificing love. It causes Him to help His enemies, even when they hurt Him. All of God's activities are permeated by His love, even His judgments.

4:9-10 –The greatest manifestation of love that this world has ever witnessed was the expression of the heavenly Father's love in sending His Son to die for His enemies so that He might save them from Hell. God fully realized the plight of lost man in his fallen condition. Without a Savior we would be doomed to suffer our well-deserved penalty in Hell forever for our own sin. God's purpose in sending His Son was that we “might live through Him.” The Father's expression of love was totally unmerited and unsolicited by us. We did not love God; we shunned His Son and did not know Him (Jn 1:10), but He loved us and offered us peace by sending His Son to pay the penalty of our sins.

“Propitiation” This refers to the act of Christ on the cross when He satisfied the just and holy demands of God. God's holy nature demanded that sin be punished by death, so He sent His Son to be the sinner's substitute to pay our penalty. God's holiness demanded the penalty of sin be paid, but God's love provided its full payment at His own expense.

B. The Course of Mature Fellowship – 4:11-21

1. Love Shown to Believers – 4:11-12

4:11 –Having just mentioned God's great manifestation of love toward believers, John exhorts them to love one another in the same manner. The example of love is God, both of the Father and of the Son. The Father gave His Son, and the Son gave His life. Jesus did not relish the anguish of the cross, but He willingly gave His life in obedience to His Father for the benefit of lost sinners. Love is not always easy, but it is always necessary.

“Ought” is a strong word that brings out the obligation that Christians have for loving each other, even if it is not easy and requires much sacrifice. **Agape** love is basically selfless giving. In a world that places “self on a pedestal.” True selflessness is a rare commodity.

In a local church there is a vast array of different personalities and maturity levels. The opportunities for individuals to rub each other the wrong way are virtually infinite. Love is longsuffering and kind and is not provoked. Such love should be the mark of all Christians: “By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love one to another” (Jn 13:35).

4:12 – “No man has seen God” – This means no one has gazed upon God in His full glory (1 Tim 6:16). However, men did see God in the Old Testament (Ex 24:9-11; Isa 6:1) and they saw God when they saw Christ in the flesh (Jn 1:1-2, 14; 14:8-11; 1 Jn 1:1-3; 5:20). But the unsaved will see God in us, in a secondary, limited sense, they will see God dwelling in a Christian when he loves his brother (cf 4:12b).

“If we love one another” – If God’s children obey this command, two things will be accomplished: (1) God dwells in them (4:13-16), and (2) God’s love is perfected in them (4:17-21). “Perfected” means to bring something to a desired end. Brotherly love is perfect love that produces mature fellowship.

2. God Dwells in Believers – 4:13-16

4:13 – “Know...we dwell in Him” – It is possible for a person to know in three ways that he dwells in God and that God dwells in him: (1) by the presence of the Spirit (4:13b); (2) by his public confession that Jesus is the Son of God (4:15); and (3) by evidence of God’s love in his life (4:16).

“Has given us of His Spirit” – The evidence of God’s Spirit working in a believer’s life is strong evidence that he dwells in God (cf. 3:24b).

4:15 – “Confess” – This was an open confession that Jesus (a man) was the Son of God, that He is really God. Neither Jews nor Gnostics believed this. To make such a confession separated that person from the religion of the Jews and the social life of the Gentiles. It was a serious confession. “Confess” is an aorist, which refers to a single act – the act at the time of salvation.

4:16 – “Have known and believed” – These are in the perfect tense (action was taken in the past but the results continue). He has known (and still knows) and he has believed (and still believes) the love that God has shown to him. In other words, he is abiding in God’s love.

3. Love is Made Perfect – 4:17-21

4:17 – “Herein is our love made perfect” – By dwelling in God a believer’s love is made perfect or made mature in two ways: (1) he will have boldness in the day of judgment (4:17-18); and (2) he will love his brother (4:19-21).

“Boldness” – Mature love will give a believer confidence when he stands before the judgment seat of Christ. Most people think of the judgment seat of Christ as a test of their works only. If their works are good then the reward shall be good. The Bible in this context says that they will also be examined on the basis of their love for one another. If they possess a mature love, they can approach the judgment seat of Christ with boldness.

4:18 – “There is no fear in love” – The two strongest emotions known to man are fear and love. Fear is negative and love is positive. Fear can only be cast out by a stronger emotion. Love is that emotion. Perfect love casts out fear.

“Torment” – This is literally “punishment.” Fear punishes the person who has it and he cannot enjoy perfect love. He who fears, loses his blessings.

4:19 – “We love” – The Christian’s source of love is found in God’s love for him. He loved the world when it was hostile toward Him. It crucified His Son, but He still loved the people in the world. He loved it so much that He saved those who would repent and receive His Son as His gift of love. That act brought a great change to the sinner’s life and now he can love by the love God has put into his life.

4:20 – John makes a very practical application in this verse. He exposes the pious hypocrites who claimed to love God but did not display a love for the believers. If a person says he loves God, but hates a fellow believer, he is a liar. One’s love for his brother is a practical test of his love for God.

4:21 – One of two commandments given in 3:23 is repeated here – a believer is to love his brother when he loves God.