

Lesson 12 – 1 John 4:1-6

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Review/Introduction

John is writing so we might know that we have eternal life (1 John 5:13). He does this by presenting the objective truth (1 John 5:11-13) and subjective evidences that give assurance of salvation. We have talked a lot about both.

John writes presenting tests to determine if true saving faith has been exercised or are the readers (and ultimately us) deceived. He makes it very clear that a profession of possessing salvation without the evidences that flow from salvation is self-deception.

The objective basis of assurance is the finished work of Christ and His promise to those that exercise true saving faith. John's inspired writings give a plethora of objective truths (John 3:15-16; 3:36; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-26; 1 John 5:1).

The Scriptures are clear that true salvation is accompanied by a changed life. Those who are truly saved will be progressing in sanctification because of God's work in their life and because they are striving in the power of Spirit to grow in their relationship with Christ.

¹²So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out your salvation with fear and trembling;** ¹³**for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.**
(Philippians 2:12-13)

The subjective evidence for assurance is the witness of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:16; 1 John 3:24), fellowship with God's people (1 John 1:3), walking in the light (1 John 1:6-7), hatred and confession of one's own sin (1 John 1:5-2:2), walking in obedience (1 John 2:5; 3:5-6), walking like Christ (1 John 2:6), not loving the world (1 John 2:15), purity (1 John 3:3), love (1 John 3:14; 18-19), overcoming the world (1 John 5:4), etc.

Specifically, last week we took a second look at the subjective evidence of love. Love is a distinguishing characteristic of the believer (1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12; 2 John 1:5). If you are a believer, you love because Christ lives in you (Galatians 2:20). It is a natural result of surrendering your life to Christ.

Love is a subjective evidence of salvation. "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death." (3:14) We can know we are a child of God if we see supernatural love being evident. But, hating demonstrates that salvation has not occurred. Saying you love is not adequate as a subjective evidence of salvation. True love is demonstrated. Since Christ laid down His life, so must you lay down your life for the brethren. There is no limit to the extreme, humble, sacrificial effort to serve the brethren.

John presents his tests in four spirals laying out doctrinal and conduct tests or evidences of true, real, actual regeneration. Each spiral starts with a doctrinal test then presents conduct tests. The spirals all have similar topics that are expanded on and/or reiterated in each spiral. John uses repetition to present his simple, yet profound, truths to encourage his readers and us.

- I. Introduction – Christ is the way of fellowship (1:1-4)
- II. Evidence of true saving faith – Spiral 1 (1:5-2:17)
 - A. Doctrine – Hold fast to truth – The way of salvation from sin (1:5-2:2)
 - B. Conduct – Obedience (2:3-6)
 - C. Conduct – Love (2:7-11)
 - D. Conduct – Sin (Don’t love the world) (2:12-17)
- III. Evidence of true saving faith – Spiral 2 (2:18-3:24)
 - A. Doctrine – Hold fast to truth – Don’t Apostatize (2:18-27)
 - B. Conduct – Christ’s coming is a purifying fixed hope (2:28-3:3)
 - C. Conduct – Sin/obedience (3:4-10)
 - D. Conduct – Love (3:11-18)
 - E. Conduct – Confidences (3:19-24)
- IV. Evidence of true saving faith – Spiral 3 (4:1-21)
 - A. **Doctrine – Hold fast to truth – Test false teachers (4:1-6)**
 - B. Conduct – Love (4:7-21)
 - C. Conduct – Obedience (5:1-5)
- V. Evidence of true saving faith – Spiral 4 (5:6-21)
 - A. Doctrine – Hold fast to truth – Christ is the way of salvation (5:6-12)
 - B. Conduct – Confidences (5:13-20)
- VI. Conclusion (5:21)

Today we will look at the doctrine test in the third spiral. Are you testing the spirits?

Spiral 3 – Doctrine – Hold fast to truth – Test the Spirits (4:1-6)

1. Command to Test the Spirits (4:1)

¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. (ESV)

Believers are “of the truth” (1 John 3:19), the “truth is in us” (1 John 1:8; 2:4), we “know the truth” (1 John 2:21), we love in “deed and truth” (1 John 3:18), and we “practice the truth” (1 John 1:6). Truth is essential to being a believer since Jesus is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14) and “is the truth” (John 14:6).

But not everyone who claims to speak the words of God (or from God’s word) speaks the truth. Not every “spiritual thing” is truth. So, John now exhorts his readers to hold fast to truth by testing what people say.

It goes without saying that in order to test the truth, we need to know the truth. And clearly, we find the truth in God’s word, not in our sin-tainted thinking.

¹⁴²Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, And **Your law is truth.** (Psalm 119:142)

¹⁵¹You are near, O Lord, And **all Your commandments are truth.** (Psalm 119:151)

¹⁶⁰The **sum of Your word is truth**, And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting. (Psalm 119:160)

¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; **Your word is truth**. (John 17:17)

¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

¹²For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

❖ Where do you go for “truth” – Scriptures or people?

John had just stated that you can have assurance that Christ is in you by seeing the Spirit’s work in your life (1 John 3:24). Now he gives two commands concerning other “spirits” – “do not believe” and “test”.

“Do not believe” means to not accept as true or worthy of their trust “every spirit”. It is something that is to be continuous – be in the habit of refusing to believe every spirit. This means we are to be discerning in what we accept as true. The only way to do this is to compare it to the word of God.

¹¹Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, **examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so**. (Acts 17:11)

“Test” is from words that mean to be tested, proved or approved, tried as metals by fire and thus purified. It means then to be put to the test for the purpose of approving like coins tested for genuineness as determined by whether it has met the required specifications. We are to continually test the spirits.

¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit; ²⁰do not despise prophetic utterances. ²¹But **examine everything carefully**; hold fast to that which is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:19)

The question arises, “What is ‘spirit’?” Does this refer to human “false prophets” or to demons. I think the answer is both. These are deceitful spirits teaching doctrines of demons by means of false prophets.

¹But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to **deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, ²by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron**, (1 Timothy 4:1-2)

²Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, ²that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be **disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us**, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2)

¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. ¹⁵**This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.** (James 3:14-15)

⁴for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. ⁵*We are* destroying **speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God**, and *we are* taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

¹For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, ²that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and *attaining* to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a true knowledge of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ *Himself*, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴**I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.** (Colossians 2:1-4)

John could have worded this sentence to simply say “don’t believe and test every false prophet”, but the Holy Spirit is making a point. The Holy Spirit spoke through humans to give truth, demons (including Satan) speak through false prophets to give heresy.

In the early church there were spiritual gifts given to confirm the message of the gospel. One of those gifts was “distinguishing of spirits”. It seems that the prophet had the gift of prophesying, and the gift of distinguishing of spirits was given to hearers of prophecy to maintain purity in the body by determining if the prophecy was from a true prophet (i.e., from God). By the time John wrote this epistle, the sign gifts had ceased since the Scriptures were completed. So now the “distinguishing of spirits” is done by every Spirit-filled believer by close study and application of the Scriptures.

²For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, ³how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was **confirmed to us by those who heard, ⁴God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.** (Hebrews 2:2-4)

⁸For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another **the distinguishing of spirits**, to another *various* kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. (1 Corinthians 12:8-11)

❖ **Are you saturating your mind with the Scriptures to guard against false teaching?**

Interestingly, John says that many false prophets have “gone out into the world”. The most dangerous “spirits” are those that at one time had a connection to the body or who appear to be Christian but claim a higher knowledge.

❖ **Do you listen to those how have a “spirituality” but don’t have the truth?**

2. Doctrinal Test for Spirits (4:2-3)

²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the *spirit* of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.

²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. (ESV)

Here is the doctrinal test for false teaching – what do they say about the person and work of Christ? When John proclaims that Jesus “came in the flesh”, he addresses Gnosticism directly, but any teaching against the person of Christ in general. “Confessing Jesus” is acknowledging that He is who He claimed to be and the resurrection proved.

Person

Jesus is the eternal, uncreated second person of the Trinity. He was eternally one with the Father and incarnated supernaturally (John 1:1-12; Matthew 1:18-25). He is the eternal God-man, fully God and fully man. In the incarnation, Jesus surrendered the prerogatives of deity but nothing of the divine essence (Philippians 2:5-8; Colossians 1:16-19).

Jesus’ virgin birth, sinless life, crucifixion, and resurrection are literal, historical events. Jesus willingly died on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for sin (John 10:15; 3:16; Romans 3:24-25; 5:8; 1 Peter 2:24). The resurrection of Jesus confirmed His deity and proved that God had accepted His atoning sacrifice (John 5:26-29; 14:19; Romans 1:4; 4:25; 6:5-10). Jesus is the only mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5) – the only way to the Father (means of salvation) (John 14:6).

❖ **Do you know enough about Christ’s person that you can discern demonic teaching?**

Work

Christ is uniquely, fully sufficient for salvation and sanctification. Salvation is only through Christ. Salvation is the work of God whereby he saves individuals from the penalty, power, and one day the very presence of sin. It is completely by God and not on the basis of human merit or works (John 1:12; Ephesians 1:7; 2:8-10; 1 Peter 1:18-19). Forgiveness of sins (Colossians 2:13-14) is a free gift (Ephesians 2:8-9) that is given to those that repent from their sins (Hebrews 6:1) and exercise faith (John 3:16) in Jesus as Lord and Savior. No pre-forgiveness work is required (i.e., baptism, good deeds, obeying commandments, going to church, giving money, praying, doing penance, joining an organization, etc.). Salvation is:

By Grace:

⁴But when the kindness of God our Savior and *His* love for mankind appeared, ⁵He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; ⁹not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Through Faith:

²⁸For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. (Romans 3:28)

¹Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, (Hebrews 6:1)

By a fully sufficient sacrifice:

¹⁰By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; ¹²but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. ¹⁴For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. (Hebrews 10:10-14)

Resulting in good works:

²⁸Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:28-29)

And kept forever:

²⁵Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25)

¹Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

Sanctification is the work of God where God transforms the believer into the image of Christ. In sanctification, the believer cooperates in the process to more and more die to sin, and live unto righteousness. This “practical” or “experiential” or “progressive” sanctification comes as the Spirit does His transforming work within us day by day (2 Corinthians 3:18).

¹⁸But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are **being transformed into the same image from glory to glory**, just as from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

¹²So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out your salvation with fear and trembling;**

¹³**for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.** (Philippians 2:12-13)

❖ **Do you know enough about Christ’s work to save and to sanctify that you can discern demonic teaching?**

3. Connectedness Test for Spirits (4:4)

⁴You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.

⁴Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (ESV)

The first test that John gives for deceitful spirits is doctrinal regarding Christ, the second is possessional. Deceitful spirits do not possess the divine life in stark contrast to true believers.

True believers are from God, are beloved, and have victory over deceitful spirits because Christ lives in them (you).

⁵Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! **Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?** (2 Corinthians 13:5)

²⁰I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but **Christ lives in me**; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. (Galatians 2:20)

¹⁰**If Christ is in you**, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. (Romans 8:10)

²⁵Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching of* the word of God, ²⁶*that is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, ²⁷to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory**. (Colossians 1:25-27)

Christ also gives true believers the resources through the Spirit to understand and cling to the truths of Scripture

¹⁰For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. ¹¹For who among men knows the *thoughts* of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.

¹²Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, ¹³which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*. ¹⁴But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. ¹⁵But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. (1 Corinthians 2:10-15)

❖ **Are you overcoming the world through the spiritual resources fully given to you?**

4. Authority Test for Spirits (4:5-6)

⁵They are from the world; therefore they speak *as* from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

⁵They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (ESV)

Here is the final test for deceitful spirits teaching doctrine of demons by means of false prophets – “by this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error”.

Deceitful spirits are from the world, speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. The common word is “world”. Deceitful spirits have as their authority, the world.

“World” is the current world system that belongs to Satan and is radically alienated against the Creator. Satan is currently referred to as the “god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4) and “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 16:11). Currently, the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). The “world” is his worldwide system of deception and wickedness that leaves God out and is opposed to Him (1 John 2:15-17; James 3:15-17). Satan’s aim is to make the values of this godless system seem attractive; appealing to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life to entice people to sin.

Worldly philosophies are not from the Father. In fact, James contrasts worldly wisdom and God’s wisdom in James 3:15-17.

¹⁵**This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.** ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. (James 3:15-17)

So, what is the content of the world’s words? Lies.

⁴³Why do you not understand what I am saying? *It is* because you cannot hear My word. ⁴⁴You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and **does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.** ⁴⁵But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. (John 8:43-45)

In contrast, those who would be true teachers of believers “listen to us”. True teachers, those who are of the spirit of truth, have as their authority apostolic teaching – the word of God. In the information age, it is so easy to be exposed to false teachings. So, we need to be ever vigilant regarding the spirit of error.

❖ **Are you careful that you align with Scripture and not your own, or another’s, error?**

Current examples of teaching of the spirit of error are: the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormon god and Jesus, Oneness Pentecostalism’s doctrine of modalism (vice the Trinity), the World Mission Society Church of God’s view of God as a mother, and the Roman Catholic doctrine of works-based, sacramental salvation.

Another example of teaching of the spirit of error is teaching that “upsets whole families” (Titus 1:11). One example is the teaching of Barbara Roberts on divorce. Roberts teaches that divorce is permitted on the grounds of verbal abuse which she identifies as abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. Her teaching allows women to lay all responsibility for marriage difficulties on the husband and seek divorce on essentially any grounds. Her teaching is invasive in many previously biblically-minded churches.

Conclusion

John is writing to present tests of true saving faith. His purpose is to ensure that his readers know if they have eternal life (actual, true, real regeneration) or not. Today, we looked a second time at false teachers and teaching and tests to determine the spirit of error from the spirit of truth.

Additional Study

1. Each time you come to the Scriptures, pray for the Spirit to give you understanding.
2. Read 1 John once this week a chapter at a time (one chapter a day for five days).
3. Pray that God would show you personal applications from today’s passage.
4. Read today’s passage noting repeated words/ideas and ask yourself what John means.
5. Re-read the notes from today and contemplate the thought questions.