

The Books of 1, 2, and 3 John

Lesson 7: Test the Spirits; God Is Love -- 1 John 4:1-21

"Do not believe every spirit," John writes, "but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." It is a strangely modern-sounding warning. We live in an age that prizes sincerity above truth, that says the heart cannot be wrong if it is genuine, that treats spiritual experience as self-authenticating. John will not have it. Not every spiritual impulse is from God. Many false prophets have gone out into the world, and the loving thing is not to believe them all but to test them.

And he gives a test with a sharp edge. The dividing line is Jesus. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; every spirit that does not is not from God. The question is always the same one John keeps returning to: what do you do with Jesus? Get Him right, the real Jesus, truly God and truly come in the flesh, and you are on solid ground. Get Him wrong, and no amount of sincerity or spiritual fervor can save the error.

Then, having warned us to test, John turns and sings. For the heart of this chapter is one of the most staggering sentences in all of Scripture: "God is love." Not merely that God loves, or that God is loving, but that love is the very essence of who He is. And John does not leave it as a slogan. He defines it at the cross: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Love is not a feeling we generate. It is a Person who came for us.

And that love, received, transforms us. "We love because he first loved us." The love of God, poured into us, makes us lovers of one another. John even ties our love to our confidence: perfect love casts out fear, and the one who abides in love abides in God. So this chapter holds discernment and devotion together. We test every spirit by the truth about Jesus, and we are tested ourselves by one question: do we love? For the God who is love has loved us first, and called us to become like Him.

Group Discussion: John tells us both to test the spirits and that God is love. Why do you think our culture finds it so easy to celebrate "God is love" while resisting the idea that we should test and discern which spiritual teachings are actually true?

Personal Reflection: John says perfect love casts out fear. Where is fear, of judgment, of rejection, of not being enough, still ruling some corner of your heart, and how might resting in God's love begin to drive it out?

Read 1 John 4:1-21

Study Questions

1. John commands, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (v. 1). What does this teach us about the need for discernment, and why is sincerity or spiritual intensity not enough to prove that something is from God?
2. John gives us a clear test for spiritual claims. How carefully do you actually examine the spiritual messages, teachers, and ideas you take in, and where have you been tempted to accept something simply because it felt moving or popular?
3. John says the test of every spirit is whether it “confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (vv. 2–3). Why does John make the incarnation of Christ the dividing line, and what does this teach about how central a right view of Jesus is to all true faith?
4. John reminds believers, “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (v. 4). When you face spiritual opposition, doubt, or the pressure of a hostile culture, do you live as though this is true? What would change if you did?
5. John declares, “God is love,” and proves it at the cross: “he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (vv. 8–10). What does it mean that God is love, and how does the cross, rather than our feelings, define what that love actually is?
6. John says, “we love because he first loved us” (v. 19). Where in your life are you trying to love others out of your own depleted resources, and how might receiving God’s love first change the way you give it?
7. John writes, “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (v. 12). What does this teach about how the invisible God becomes visible in the world, and about the connection between God abiding in us and our love for one another?
8. John ties love and fear together: “perfect love casts out fear” (v. 18). What fear is God inviting you to surrender to His love, and what would it look like to live less from fear and more from the security of being loved by Him?
9. John says plainly, “if anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (v. 20), grounding our love for one another in God’s prior love for us. Why does John insist that love for the unseen God must show itself in love for the brother we can see, and what does this reveal about the kind of faith and love that are real?
10. Look back across this passage, from testing the spirits, to the God who is love, to perfect love that casts out fear. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you, through this passage, into someone who both holds fast to the truth about Him and loves as one who has been loved.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: John 3:16–17, God’s love shown in sending His Son; Romans 5:6–11, God demonstrating His love in Christ’s death for sinners; 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, the character of the love God pours into us; Romans 8:31–39, nothing able to separate us from the love of God in

Christ; 1 John 4:1 alongside Matthew 7:15–20, testing teachers by their fruit and their confession.