

How Can I Know?, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Testing the Spirits, Holding the Truth

1 John 4:1-6

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage turns to discernment, and it bears on assurance in a crucial way: a confidence built on a false Christ or a distorted gospel is no assurance at all. John commands believers to test the spirits, and he sets the test at the person of Christ, whether a teaching confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. The teacher should make clear what is at stake in the full incarnation, that the eternal Son truly became man, since both the deity and the humanity of Christ are necessary for our salvation. The most doctrinally weighty material comes at the end, where John appeals to apostolic authority. This must be developed into a clear statement that our authority today is the complete, inspired New Testament, against any claim of present-day new revelation or continuing apostleship.

The pastoral task runs in two directions. Some believers are undiscerning, absorbing theology passively from appealing but unreliable sources, and they need to be roused to test what shapes them. Others are anxious and over-scrupulous, inclined to doubt every teacher and every assurance, and they need to hear that the greater One who indwells them will keep them, and that God's written word is solid ground beneath their feet. The teacher should also help students see that anchoring assurance in feelings or claimed new revelations is unstable, while anchoring it in the apostolic word is secure.

Beyond the doctrine, aim at formation. The goal is that students both grow in discernment, testing what they take in against Scripture, and grow more deeply immersed in the real Christ, so that their assurance rests on the true Jesus revealed in the true gospel. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, on apostolic authority and the sufficiency of the written word. Let that question carry the weight, while the rest of the lesson trains the heart to hold the truth with courage and love.

Question 1

Student Question:

John commands, "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" (4:1). Why does John call believers to test spiritual claims rather than simply trusting them, and what does this teach about discernment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the bracing command itself. John does not tell believers to trust every spiritual-sounding voice; he tells them to test. This cuts against a naive openness that assumes anything passionate or religious must be from God. Discernment is not a lack of love or faith; it is an act of both.

Explain the reason John gives: 'many false prophets have gone out into the world.' Deception is not rare or hypothetical; it is common and active. Teachers claiming inspiration may in fact be voicing error. The presence of many false prophets makes testing a necessity, not an option.

Clarify what testing means. It is not cynical suspicion of everyone, nor the elevation of our own opinions, but the measuring of every teaching against the revealed truth of God, supremely against the truth about Christ that John is about to name. Scripture is the standard against which spirits are tested.

Apply this to assurance. A faith that has never examined its foundations is fragile; it can be overturned by the next persuasive voice. The believer who tests what he is taught, and finds it true, stands on solid ground. Discernment protects and strengthens genuine assurance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The command to test, not naively trust, spiritual claims
- The reality and prevalence of false prophets and deception
- Testing as measuring teaching against revealed truth, especially the truth about Christ
- Discernment as a protector and strengthener of genuine assurance

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John call us to test spiritual claims rather than simply trust them?
- How is discernment an act of love and faith rather than a lack of them?
- What standard should we use to test what we are taught?

Question 2

Student Question:

Consider the spiritual voices that actually shape you, the books, media, teachers, and friends. How carefully do you test what you take in against Scripture, and where might you be absorbing ideas about God simply because they are appealing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question makes the command personal and practical. Every believer is being formed by a stream of voices, many of them chosen for comfort or entertainment rather than truth. The question asks students to notice what is actually shaping their picture of God.

Help students recognize undiscerning intake. We often absorb theology passively, from a catchy song, a popular author, a confident influencer, a beloved relative, without ever measuring it against Scripture. Appealing and true are not the same thing, and sincere people can be sincerely wrong.

Name the particular pull of teachings that flatter us, that promise health and wealth, that minimize sin, that reshape God into a more comfortable image. These are appealing precisely because they tell us what we want to hear, and that is exactly when discernment is most needed.

Encourage a concrete practice. Invite students to begin testing their intake: to read and listen with Scripture open, to ask of each teaching, 'Is this actually what the Bible says?' The goal is not fearful withdrawal but active, Scripture-anchored discernment.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The formative power of the spiritual voices we consume
- The danger of absorbing theology passively and uncritically
- The special pull of teachings that flatter rather than challenge
- Testing our intake against Scripture as a regular practice

Discussion Prompts

- Which voices most shape your picture of God right now?
- How carefully do you actually test what you take in against Scripture?
- Where might you be absorbing ideas simply because they are appealing?

Question 3

Student Question:

John gives a clear test: "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (4:2). Why does John make the truth about the person of Christ the dividing line, and what is at stake in confessing that Jesus has come in the flesh?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John locates the test precisely at the person of Christ: does the teaching confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? This is not an arbitrary password but the central truth of the gospel. The false teachers of John's day were denying the full reality of the incarnation, and John makes the incarnation the fault line.

Explain what is at stake. To confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is to affirm that the eternal Son of God truly became a real human being, that the divine and the human met in one person. If Jesus was not truly God, He could not save; if He was not truly man, He could not stand in our place and die for us. The whole gospel hangs on getting Christ right.

Show why this is the dividing line for discernment. Many errors can be traced to a distorted view of who Jesus is. Get the person of Christ wrong, and the work of Christ, the way of salvation, and everything else will be distorted in turn. So John tests the spirits at the most foundational point.

Apply it to assurance. Our confidence rests on the real Jesus, fully God and fully man, who actually came, actually died, and actually rose. A faith anchored in the true Christ is secure; a faith anchored in a counterfeit Christ, however sincere, rests on nothing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The person of Christ as the dividing line for testing the spirits
- The full incarnation: the eternal Son truly became man
- The deity and humanity of Christ as both necessary for salvation
- A right view of Christ as the foundation of secure assurance

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John make the truth about Christ the central test?
- What is at stake in confessing that Jesus has truly come in the flesh?
- How does anchoring your faith in the true Christ make your assurance secure?

Question 4

Student Question:

It is possible to drift, often without noticing, toward a more comfortable or distorted picture of Jesus than the one Scripture gives. Where might your own image of Jesus have quietly drifted from the Christ revealed in the Bible, and how would returning to the real Jesus change you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the test inward. We rarely deny Christ outright; more often we slowly reshape Him into an image we prefer. The Jesus of our imagination can become softer, more permissive, more like us, and less like the Christ of the Gospels.

Help students name common distortions: a Jesus who only affirms and never confronts, a Jesus who exists to make us prosperous, a Jesus reduced to a moral example with no claim to lordship, a Jesus so divine He was not truly human or so human He was not truly God. Each is a quiet departure from the real Christ.

Show why this matters for the heart, not just the head. We become like the God we worship. A distorted Christ produces a distorted discipleship: a softened Jesus breeds a soft, undemanding faith; a merely useful Jesus breeds a self-centered one. Returning to the real Jesus reshapes the whole of life.

Encourage a return to the Scriptures themselves. The remedy for a drifting image of Christ is immersion in the Gospels, where we meet Him as He actually is, holy and compassionate, gentle and uncompromising. Invite students to let the biblical Christ correct and enlarge their picture of Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The subtle drift toward a self-made image of Christ
- Common distortions of Jesus and their effect on discipleship
- We become like the God we worship; a distorted Christ distorts the believer
- Returning to the Christ of Scripture as the remedy

Discussion Prompts

- Where might your image of Jesus have drifted from the Christ of Scripture?
- How does a distorted picture of Jesus produce a distorted faith?
- How would returning to the real Jesus change you?

Question 5

Student Question:

John speaks of “the spirit of the antichrist” and says the false teachers “are from the world, and therefore... the world listens to them” (4:3, 5). What does it mean that false teaching is ‘from the world,’ and why does the world so readily receive it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John identifies the source of false teaching: it is ‘from the world,’ that is, from the system of human life organized in rebellion against God. Error is not merely an intellectual mistake; it springs from a heart and a culture at odds with God, animated by the spirit of antichrist that opposes the true Christ.

Explain why ‘the world listens to them.’ False teaching is popular precisely because it speaks the world’s language and flatters the world’s desires. It demands no repentance, offends no pride, and confirms what people already want to believe. Its wide acceptance is no proof of its truth; often it is a warning sign.

Contrast this with the reception of God’s truth. The genuine word of God frequently meets resistance because it confronts sin and calls for surrender. The believer should not be surprised when the truth is less popular than the counterfeit, nor mistake popularity for divine approval.

Apply it to discernment. Asking ‘who is applauding this teaching, and why?’ can be revealing. When a message is embraced chiefly because it asks nothing and flatters everything, the believer has reason to test it carefully against the word of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- False teaching as springing from 'the world,' the system in rebellion against God
- The spirit of antichrist as opposition to the true Christ
- The world's ready reception of error that flatters its desires
- Popularity as no proof of truth, and often a warning sign

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that false teaching is 'from the world'?
- Why does the world so readily embrace teaching that flatters it?
- Why should we not mistake a teaching's popularity for its truth?

Question 6

Student Question:

Standing for the truth about Christ can be costly when the surrounding culture finds it offensive or outdated. Where do you feel pressure to soften or hide what Scripture teaches, and what would it look like to hold the truth with both courage and love?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses on the cost of holding the truth. John's readers lived among teachers and a culture hostile to the real Christ, and so do we. There are points where Scripture's teaching about Christ, sin, salvation, and the moral life runs directly against the surrounding culture, and the pressure to soften it is strong.

Help students name where they feel the pressure. It may be the lordship of Christ as the only way to God, the reality of sin and judgment, the call to a holy life, or the church's pattern of faith and practice. The temptation is to mute these truths to avoid offense or rejection.

Hold courage and love together. Holding the truth is not a license for harshness; John, the apostle of love, is also the apostle of truth. We are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), neither hiding it out of fear nor wielding it as a weapon. The goal is faithful witness with a gracious spirit.

Encourage a concrete resolve. Ask students to identify one area where they have been softening or hiding the truth, and one way they could hold it more faithfully and graciously this week. Faithfulness in small settings prepares us for larger ones.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cost of holding the truth about Christ in a hostile culture
- Common pressure points: the lordship of Christ, sin and judgment, the call to holiness
- Speaking the truth in love, against both cowardly silence and harshness (Ephesians 4:15)

- Faithful, gracious witness as the believer's calling

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you feel pressure to soften or hide what Scripture teaches?
- How do we hold the truth with both courage and love?
- What is one area where you could be more faithful and gracious in witness?

Question 7

Student Question:

John gives a great assurance: "you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (4:4). What is the basis of the believer's confidence in the face of false teaching, and how is this not mere self-confidence?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John turns from warning to comfort. The believer is not defenseless before deception. 'You are from God and have overcome them,' he says, and the reason is decisive: 'he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.' The victory rests on the One who indwells the believer.

Identify the 'he who is in you.' This is God Himself, by His Spirit, dwelling in the believer. The confidence John offers is not self-confidence, not trust in our own cleverness or strength to spot every error, but confidence in the greater One who is in us and who has already overcome the world.

Explain how this guards against two errors. It guards against fear, the anxious sense that deception is too clever and we are sure to be deceived; the greater One protects His own. And it guards against pride, the notion that we are too smart to be fooled; our security is in God, not in ourselves, so we remain humble and watchful.

Apply it to assurance. The believer can face a world full of false prophets without panic, because the God in him is greater than every spirit arrayed against him. This is steadying: our standing and our safety rest on God's power, not on the perfection of our own discernment.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer's victory over false teaching grounded in the indwelling God
- 'He who is in you' as God Himself, greater than the spirit of the world
- Confidence in God rather than self-confidence in our own discernment
- Freedom from both fear of deception and prideful self-reliance

Discussion Prompts

- What is the real basis of the believer's confidence against false teaching?

- How is this different from mere self-confidence?
- How does 'greater is He who is in you' steady you without making you proud?

Question 8

Student Question:

Discernment is not only protective; it shapes who we become. How might deliberately filling your mind with the truth of Scripture, rather than merely guarding against error, strengthen your assurance and your love for Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves discernment from the merely defensive to the positively formative. Guarding against error is necessary, but the deeper safeguard is being so filled with truth that error finds little room. The best defense against the counterfeit is deep familiarity with the genuine.

Use the analogy of those trained to detect counterfeit currency by handling the real thing until any forgery feels wrong in the hand. So the believer steeped in Scripture develops an instinct for truth and a sensitivity to error, not by studying every false teaching, but by knowing the real Christ deeply.

Show the effect on assurance and love. As we fill our minds with the truth about God and Christ, our confidence grows more settled and our affection for Christ deepens. We are not merely avoiding danger; we are being formed into people who love and treasure the truth.

Encourage a concrete habit. Invite students to commit to a regular, intentional intake of Scripture, not only to defend against error but to be shaped by the truth. Ask what one practice they could begin that would fill their minds more with Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Being filled with truth as the deepest safeguard against error
- Knowing the genuine Christ deeply as the way to detect the counterfeit
- Scripture intake as formative, deepening assurance and love for Christ
- A positive, not merely defensive, approach to discernment

Discussion Prompts

- How does filling your mind with truth guard you better than merely studying errors?
- How does deep familiarity with the real Christ help you sense the counterfeit?
- What habit could you begin to fill your mind more with the truth of Christ?

Question 9

Student Question:

John says, "Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us" (4:6). What is the basis of authority John appeals to here, and how does this passage teach us to anchor our assurance in the apostolic, written word of God rather than in new revelations or personal feelings?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson and deserves the fullest treatment. John makes a striking claim of authority: 'Whoever knows God listens to us.' The 'us' is John and the apostles, the eyewitnesses appointed by Christ to deliver His truth. Receiving or rejecting the apostolic message becomes itself a test of whether one is truly from God.

Establish the foundation of apostolic authority. The apostles did not speak on their own; they were commissioned by Christ and guided by the Spirit into all truth (John 16:13). Their teaching, now preserved in the New Testament Scriptures, carries the authority of Christ Himself. The church is built 'on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone' (Ephesians 2:20).

Draw the conclusion for our authority today. We no longer have the living apostles among us, but we have their inspired writings, the complete New Testament, which is the all-sufficient, God-breathed standard for faith and practice (2 Timothy 3:16–17). To 'listen to the apostles' today is to submit to their written word. This is where the believer anchors his faith and tests every teaching.

Guard against the errors John's principle exposes. Some claim present-day new revelations, ongoing apostleship, or fresh words from God that go beyond Scripture; but the apostolic foundation was laid once, the faith was 'once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3), and we add nothing to it. Others anchor assurance in personal feelings or impressions; but feelings must be tested by the apostolic word, not the other way around. The written word of God, not new revelation and not our subjective experience, is the firm ground.

Bring it home for assurance. Here is why this matters so much for our study: an assurance anchored in shifting feelings or in someone's claimed new revelation is no assurance at all. But an assurance anchored in the unchanging, apostolic, written word of God is solid. When God's own word tells the obedient believer that he has eternal life, he may rest on it with full confidence, because he is resting on the authority of Christ delivered through His apostles.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Apostolic authority: the eyewitnesses commissioned by Christ to deliver His truth
- The apostles guided by the Spirit into all truth (John 16:13; Ephesians 2:20)
- The complete New Testament as the all-sufficient, inspired standard (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

- Against present-day new revelation and continuing apostleship; the faith once for all delivered (Jude 3)
- Against anchoring assurance in feelings; feelings tested by the word, not the reverse
- Assurance grounded in the unchanging apostolic word as solid ground

Discussion Prompts

- What authority is John appealing to when he says 'whoever knows God listens to us'?
- How do we 'listen to the apostles' today?
- Why is an assurance anchored in the written word more secure than one anchored in feelings or new revelations?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this lesson on testing the spirits and holding the truth. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses, and the single truth from 1 John 4:1-6 that you most need to carry into the coming week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson and turns it toward formation. Aim for a personal response, and give students room to reflect on how they actually take in and test spiritual teaching.

Listen for where each person stands. Some need to become more discerning, more careful about the voices shaping them. Others, already anxious and prone to doubt every teacher including faithful ones, need to rest in the assurance that the greater One in them will keep them and that God's word is solid ground.

Encourage something concrete: a habit of testing intake against Scripture, a deeper immersion in the Gospels to know the real Christ, or a phrase from verse 4 to hold onto. Discernment and assurance both grow through practice.

Point forward. Having anchored assurance in the true Christ and the apostolic word, the next lesson turns to the perfecting of love that casts out fear, showing how a heart secure in God's love is finally freed from the terror that haunts so many believers. Reassure the class that the path leads toward freedom.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation as the goal of the study, not merely information
- The discernment-deficient and the over-anxious both addressed by the passage
- Discernment and assurance grown through practice
- Truth about Christ and the apostolic word as foundation for the perfect love that follows

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from this lesson you most need to carry this week?
- Where is Jesus calling you to greater discernment about the voices shaping you?
- How does it steady you that the One in you is greater than every voice in the world?