

How Can I Know?

Lesson 8: Testing the Spirits, Holding the Truth -- 1 John 4:1-6

We live in an age that prizes sincerity above almost everything else. If a person feels something deeply, if a teacher speaks with confidence and warmth, we are inclined to trust it. Surely anyone this passionate, this spiritual, this kind, must be telling the truth. But John, writing to churches surrounded by persuasive teachers claiming the Spirit's inspiration, says something that cuts against our instincts: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). Sincerity is not the test. Confidence is not the test. Truth is the test.

This might feel like a strange turn in a study on assurance. We have been talking about quieting the condemning heart, about resting in God's love. Why suddenly talk about testing teachers and discerning false prophets? Because assurance has to be anchored in something true. A confidence built on a false Christ or a distorted gospel is not real assurance at all; it is a comfortable illusion. John knows that you cannot be truly secure if the ground beneath you is rotten. So he teaches us to make sure our faith rests on the real Jesus, revealed in the real gospel.

And John gives us a clear test, one that centers on the person of Christ. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that denies this is not. The dividing line runs straight through the question of who Jesus is. The false teachers of John's day were already chipping away at the truth that the eternal Son had truly become man, and John says: there is the fault line. Get Jesus wrong, and everything built on Him will eventually give way.

There is great comfort here too, woven right into the warning. "Little children, you are from God and have overcome them," John writes, "for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (4:4). The believer is not left defenseless against deception. God has given us His truth, His Spirit, and His apostolic word, and the One who is in us is greater than every counterfeit. This lesson teaches us to hold fast the truth about Christ, so that our assurance rests on the solid rock of who He really is. Read these verses, and learn to test what you are told.

Group Discussion: John warns, "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (4:1). Why are sincere believers often reluctant to test what teachers and spiritual voices tell them? What happens to a person's assurance when it is built on a teaching that turns out to be false?

Personal Reflection: Think about the spiritual voices and teachings that shape you, through books, media, podcasts, and people. How carefully do you actually test what you take in against Scripture? Where might you be absorbing ideas about God simply because they sound appealing or come from a confident, likable source?

Read 1 John 4:1-6

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: John 1:1–14, the Word who was God and became flesh; 2 John 7–11, the warning against those who deny Christ come in the flesh; Acts 17:11, the Bereans testing the message against the Scriptures; 2 Timothy 3:14–17, the God-breathed Scriptures sufficient for every good work; Jude 3, contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.