

Test the Spirits

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Preacher: Lee Roberts

[0:00] Tonight we'll resume our study in 1 John that we paused six months ago.

! We'll eventually cover 1 John 4, 1 through 6 tonight,! but because it's been six months since our last study, let's do some extended review to set it up. When we started the book, we talked about John's purposes for writing it.

The primary purpose is in 1 John 5, 13. He said there, These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

In 1 John 1, 4, John included another purpose. He said there, In these things we write to you, that your joy may be full. John wants us to know that we have eternal life, and he wants us to have full joy with that.

And to accomplish that purpose, and both of those purposes actually, he begins with a series of tests. And the first test, in verses 1 through 4, covered whether we have a correct view about Jesus.

[1:15] And we just read verse 4, but let's read the first four verses together, so we get the full context. 1 John 1, 1 through 4 says, That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the word of life.

The life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested to us. That which we have seen and heard, we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

In these things we write to you, that your joy may be full. In John's day, as in ours, false teachings about Christ were common. Some false teachers said that Jesus was God, but not man.

Other false teachers said that Jesus was man, but not God. And both sets of these false teachings threatened to have the same effect, and that was diminishing Jesus and discrediting his work on the cross.

The first four verses clearly showed, though, that Jesus was both God and man. John, an eyewitness of Jesus, reminded us of John's own definite testimony about that. He also reminded us of the divine fellowship that all believers have with God and Jesus.

[2:36] When we get to the new material tonight, you'll see how much it reminds you of these first four verses, because John will again talk about how important the correct view of Jesus is.

A little bit later in chapter one and on into chapter two, John reminded us of another way to know that we have eternal life. Confessing our sins is a key indicator of whether we are saved as well. While the false teachers would not admit their sin, the genuine Christian admitted and forsook his sin. The term confess there means to say the same thing about sin as God does, and to acknowledge God's perspective about that sin.

Remember the good news contained in 1 John 1, 9, though? That's where John said, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Rather than focusing on confessing for every single sin, John has especially in mind here a subtle recognition and an acknowledgement that we're sinners in need of cleansing and forgiveness.

[3:48] If you'll remember back then, we spent some time talking about how the original text of 1 John 1, 9, proves that when we confess the sins we know about, God also will cleanse us for the sins about which we're unaware.

The Greek text for 1 John 1, 9 lacks the second our, after our sins. And you can see that because of the italics in the English text. So literally the text reads, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us the sins.

We could paraphrase that thought by saying, If we confess our sins, he will forgive the sins we confess, and moreover will even cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So in 1 John 2, 3 through 6 then, moving on to the next test, John reminded us about the significance of obedience. Those who obey God's word give evidence that they're genuine believers.

So obedience is another way to tell whether our faith is real. And if you look at 1 John 2, 3, that verse simply says, Now by this we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

[4:57] Instead of patterning their lives after Jesus because they have to, true believers pattern their lives after Jesus because they want to. The Christian as a child of God ought to obey God because of a sincere desire to do so.

So it should be a joy to follow in the footsteps of the one who died for us. The fourth test looked at the significance of love, and we're not going to cover that tonight in the review.

This test was 1 John 2, 7 through 11. The reason why we're not covering it tonight is next week, John returns to the subject of love, and we'll look at that in more detail at that point.

So from there, John talked about the importance of spiritual growth. So look at 1 John 2, 12 through 14. That's where John wrote, I write to you little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his namesake.

I write to you fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you young men, because you have overcome the wicked one. I write to you little children, because you have known the father.

[6:02] I have written to you fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I have written to you young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.

The first and most fundamental word of encouragement that John can give to all members of the church in the past and in the present is that we've been forgiven of our sins, and this forgiveness remains effective in our lives.

So we've come to know God as our Heavenly Father, and as a result, that makes us part of God's family if we're true believers. This forgiveness occurs because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that made the mercy and grace of God available to those who repent of their sins and believe in the name of Jesus.

And when we looked at this passage in detail, we spent quite a bit of time talking about four different stages of spiritual growth. Then we summarized spiritual growth like this. We said spiritual growth is the process of taking in the truth of God and growing on the basis of believing and responding to that truth.

Spiritual growth is directly related to an increase in your understanding of God's revelation. As we increase our understanding of God's revelation and apply that understanding to our lives, we will become more and more like Him.

[7:21] From there, then, John gave us some warnings. He first told us about dangerous love. So listen to 1 John 2, 15 through 17. He said, Do not love the world or the things in the world.

If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

And then in 2, 17, he says, In these verses, world is a reference to the spiritual system of evil that's dominated by Satan.

And it also is a reference to all that the world offers that's in opposition to God, His word, and His people. So world here, then, is the morally evil system opposed to all that God is and holds dear.

So in this sense, world is the satanic system opposing Christ's kingdom on this earth. And that definition will come into play again tonight when we get to the new material, too. In other words, we love the people of the world, but we don't love the sinful attitudes and values that they embrace.

[8:34] But of course, when we looked at 2, 17, John did more than just tell us what to avoid. He also told us why we should avoid these things, because he said, he who does the will of God abides forever.

John's next warning came in 2, 18 through 27, when he cautioned us about dangerous people that we might run into. Listen to just 2, 18 and 19.

He said, John says, So the many antichrist are the false teachers that John opposed in this letter.

So they're reminiscent of the false Christ that Jesus told the apostles about in Matthew 24, 24. So they're the forerunners of the future antichrist, also known as the beast in the book of Revelation. And that antichrist will exalt himself above God. So as we're waiting for the return of Jesus Christ, we know then that there's going to be a growing prevalence of counterfeits. And with the number of false teachers continuing to rise, John knew that his original readers and we ourselves would need to know how to recognize the false teachers.

[10:17] And in 1 John 2, 19, he highlighted one of the characteristics of the antichrist and the false teachers. He said they depart from the faith. A second characteristic is that they deny that Jesus is the Messiah.

And then a third characteristic is in verse 226. 226 says, Those false teachers apparently sought to undermine the reader's conviction that Jesus is the Christ and that they had eternal life through him. John's insistence then that his readers genuinely know God and his truth was part of his strategy then to fortify his readers then and also his readers now against the antichrist.

After that characteristic and after each characteristic of the false teachers, John gave a characteristic of true believers. And verses 20 and 21 told us that instead of departing from the faith, true believers show discernment.

So listen to 220 and 221. John said, But you have an anointing from the Holy One and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it and that no lie is of the truth.

[11:33] Then verses 24 and 25 of chapter 2 reminded us that true believers show devotion. And verse 27 had the final characteristic of believers in that section.

John told us that true believers rely on sound doctrine. Starting with 228 then, John wrote one of the most encouraging sections of the letter.

So we're going to read 228 to 33 to remind ourselves of that here. John said, And now little children, abide in him, that when he appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed before him at his coming.

If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of him. Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God.

Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be. But we know that when he is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

[12:39] And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. When you read that, you can tell that being a child of God stirs within John a sense of wonder, awe, and amazement, because the expressions that he uses there carries both a qualitative and a quantitative force.

He's saying, What glorious, measureless love. So this love originating with God always seeks the true welfare of those who are being loved. So it's amazing indeed, then, when we remember the destitution of the people that he loves.

You know, compared to God, we are really nothing at all. But God's love is a work that works visible, transforming results in the lives of its recipients.

So living in the reality of Christ's return, then, should make a difference in the Christian's behavior. Because Christians will someday be like Christ, we should have a desire to grow and become more like Christ now.

Then 3, 4 through 24 made up one long section that we covered over multiple lessons. And the primary aim of this long section was to combat false teachers who are corrupting the fundamentals of the faith.

[13:52] Verses 4 through 10 conveyed that genuine believers practice righteousness. And verses 11 through 24 taught us that genuine believers practice love toward fellow believers.

John was very concerned that Christians know how to tell the truth from the false, the genuine from the artificial, true believers from false ones. So he presented some tests here to help determine the validity of anybody's claims to be a Christian.

Our most recent lesson in 1 John covered the last nine verses of that larger section. And in those verses, John reminded us of several things that we know. In every case, in that section, the verb know refers to a knowledge that has been gained through diligent contemplation.

So it's an acquired understanding. The perfect tense there emphasizes a historical encounter with Christ that has ongoing results continuing on into the present. So let's read 16 through 24 of chapter 3.

John says, By this we know love because he laid down his life for us and we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother in need and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

[15 : 11] My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth and shall assure our hearts before him.

For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God and whatever we ask, we receive from him because we keep his commandments and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. And this is his commandment that we should believe on the name of his son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as he gave us commandments. Now he who keeps his commandments abides in him and he in him.

And by this we know that he abides in us by the spirit whom he has given us. The first thing that we as believers know is love.

John's knowledge of this nature of love was made known at Calvary, but it's a love that he continually grows and develops as he matures as God's child. And the same thing should apply to us as well.

[16 : 16] The expression he laid down his life for us occurs only here in 1 John, but it's a common phrase in John's gospel. Laid down involves a deliberate, willful act that demonstrated Christ's love for us.

His act was an atonement and a self-designed sacrifice on behalf of others. So John's primary concern is to stress the exemplary aspect of that sacrifice.

Then verses 19 through 23 had the second occurrence of the phrase by this we know. And this time we see that by this we know that we are of the truth. Verse 20 is important to understand there.

So let's look at that verse one more time. It's a single sentence. 320 says, For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and knows all things. John's telling us there that our conscience may not acknowledge the loving deeds that we've done in the power of the Holy Spirit, but God does and God is superior to our heart.

So unlike our conscience, God takes everything into account, including Christ's atoning work for us. God's more compassionate and understanding toward us than we sometimes are toward ourselves.

[17 : 27] That's kind of amazing to think, isn't it, when you think of who God is to think that God will sometimes be more compassionate and understanding toward us than we are to our own selves. In our desire to live lives of high moral character and good deeds toward others, we'll often fail.

In fact, we'll usually fail, it seems like. So we'll fall short even of our own ideals, let alone God's. But when this happens, our hearts may condemn us, but we can rest in God's presence because God knows everything.

He knows that we believe in Christ and that we strive to love our brothers and that we regret it when we fall short. The good thing about God is He does not look only at the outer facts of imperfect love, but at the inner fact of having been born again of God.

The human heart's not the final standard, rather God is, and God's power is what keeps us secure in Him. God's power in steadfastness and not our own gives us the security.

So God's omniscience should strengthen and encourage us, but it should also challenge us too because we know that God knows everything. He will require an accounting for the service that we do on His behalf.

[18 : 40] Then the third thing we know is that God abides in us and 1 John 3.24 tells us how we know that. 3.24 is the verse that said, Now he who keeps his commandments abides in him and he in him, and by this we know that he abides in us by the Spirit whom he has given us.

So there John resumed the thought of verse 22, which was keeping God's commandments, and prepares us for what follows in chapter 4, which we're going to look at tonight, and that is testing the spirits.

So John again introduces a mutual abiding relationship for those who obey God's commands. Someone who's characteristically living in obedience has a reciprocal fellowship with God, and the present tense of abide there indicates a close and permanent abiding, and that abiding is between

the child of God and the Heavenly Father.

So the primary evidence of our mutual abiding experience in God is the presence of the Holy Spirit, in our lives. And that Holy Spirit is the source from which the certainty of our relationship with God is drawn.

Believe it or not, we actually are going to cover new verses tonight, and we're finally up through those new verses. Let's go ahead and read 1 John 4, 1 through 6. And when we read them, you'll see that they definitely tie to the end of chapter 3, because they end with the familiar phrase, by this we know.

[20:07] Here are 1 John 4, 1 through 6. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God. Because many false prophets have gone out into the world, by this you know the Spirit of God.

Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world, therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.

We are of God, he who knows God hears us. He who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

You can tell from the very first sentence that John wants us to test the spirits. As we study the verses in more detail, we'll break the passage into three sections.

[21:22] The first section is the test itself. So let's look at that test, and that comes in verse 1. Verse 1 is the verse that says, Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

During our extended review to start this lesson, we revisited a few times where John has already warned us about false teachers. You can see here that he does it again.

He doesn't say that many false prophets will go out into the world. He says that many have gone out into the world. And that's why discernment is so important. We must know how to recognize those false teachers.

John begins the section with an admonishment, and that's a compassionate pastoral greeting of Beloved. He genuinely loves those to whom he's writing, and it's this sentiment that motivates him again to warn them of the dangers to the faith.

His warning is pretty clear, too. Behind every statement is a spirit, but not every spirit is the spirit of God. Listen to this quote from John Stott.

[22:36] Neither Christian believing nor Christian loving is to be indiscriminate. In particular, Christian faith is not to be mistaken for credulity, which is willingness to believe or trust too readily, especially without proper or adequate evidence.

True faith examines its object before reposing confidence in it. John tells us to test the spirits, and the verb translated test there means to prove or to examine, like coins that were being tested for genuineness and proper weight.

And that test is something that should be done on a continual basis. This particular task for the people of God is not new. Remember, back in Elijah's day, we had the prophets of Baal and the prophets of Asherah who were in opposition to Elijah.

Elijah, of course, was the true prophet of God, but he had to prove that. Then earlier, even, Moses put forth clear instructions about how to determine a false prophet.

These instructions come straight from the Bible. The first is from Deuteronomy 18.22, and the second is from Deuteronomy 13.1-3. So here's 18.22 out of Deuteronomy.

[24:08] Moses said, When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken, the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you shall not be afraid of him.

So when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken, the prophet has spoken presumptuously, you should not be afraid of him.

That's pretty clear, isn't it? If something that the prophet predicts doesn't happen, then he's not a true prophet. But there's a second test, and that second test has to do with what happens when

what the prophet says does come to pass.

And this is in Deuteronomy 13, 1 through 3. Those verses say, If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass of which he spoke to you, saying, Let us go after other gods which you have not known, and let us serve them, you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

So even if something a prophet says comes true, if that prophet is telling you to follow a God that's different than the God of the Bible, you know that prophet is also a false prophet.

[25 : 40] Based upon this criteria, we can immediately eliminate those supposed prophets whose prophecies fail to come true, and then like we said, for those whose prophecies do come true, we have to take the test further.

We have to look at whether the prophet is telling us to worship a God that's different than the God of the Bible, and if he is, then that prophet is a false prophet too. In the New Testament, Paul also dealt with the importance of distinguishing between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

The tendency to ascribe any unusual phenomenon to God led Paul to encourage the Christians to test the spirits by evaluating exactly what was said, and that was in 1 Corinthians 12, 1 through 3, and also 14, 29.

Christians needed to be reminded that demonic activity could penetrate even their churches. We need to remember that spiritual activity is not necessarily God's activity. That's why we must be discerning, and we must listen and evaluate carefully the message and the messenger against the infallible authority of Scripture.

So we always should go back and test the message against what Scripture says, and we should be able to tie that message to Scripture. If we can't, then that's something we should avoid believing.

[27 : 01] In the second section of tonight's passage, John reminds us what we are to use as the test, and John reminds us that we are to measure profits against the truth.

And let's look at what that truth is. So look at verses 2 and 3 one more time. John said, By this you know the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.

And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. Be sure to let one particular sentence sink into your mind tonight.

That sentence spans the end of verse 2 and the beginning of verse 3. That sentence says, Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.

That sounds like a pretty simple test there, doesn't it? We need to dig a little deeper, though, because the Greek construction doesn't just mean that they confess Christ as having come to earth, but that they confess that he came in the flesh to the earth, that his human body was physically real.

[28 : 23] So to be true prophets, both the full humanity and the full deity of Jesus must be equally maintained by the teacher to be considered genuinely of the spirit. That Holy Spirit testifies to the true nature of the Son, while Satan and his forces distort and deny that true nature.

John accentuates the crucial importance of this sound doctrine expressed in God's Word, and of course, God's Word is the only absolute and trustworthy standard. So this test is comprehensive, because every spirit will either be approved or rejected based upon this Christological test.

The test is also confessional, though, too, because the legitimacy of a prophet should be determined by the content of his message, what he confesses about Jesus.

The verb confess there indicates an unwavering confession. It's an open and forthright declaration of the message as one's own belief or position.

Anybody can talk about Jesus and even believe that he lived on earth as other religions and cults and philosophies often affirm. But unless those people also affirm the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus, they are not truly confessing Jesus.

[29 : 42] They don't have the God of the Bible. Instead, as John states, they're under the influence of the spirit of the Antichrist. Of course, we see that today with a lot of so-called churches even in our area and in our own town.

If you look at their views about Jesus, they don't have the same views as the Bible. One thing we can be thankful for, though, is that true believers will be successful in their testing of false spirits. And that's what John tells us in the third and final section of this passage. In verses 4-6, we see the triumph. So let's look at that triumph as we read verses 4-6 again.

He says, You are of God, little children, and have overcome them because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world, therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.

We are of God. He who knows God hears us. He who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

[30 : 52] Look at the beginning of verse 4. Just the first four words. John says, You are of God. Of God there means more than belonging to.

It indicates that the source of the original reader's attitude and actions was God himself. We have to identify either with God or with the devil.

And we can overcome by recognizing false teachers and refusing to follow them. He who is in you, for the true believer, is the Holy Spirit.

He who is in the world is the devil. Reliance on God, then, is the secret of all victory, whether over heresy or any other snare. So listen to that again.

Reliance on God is the secret of all victory, whether over heresy or any other snare. If you look at verse 4 again, pay particular attention to the tense.

[31 : 54] John says, He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. The tense is present perfect there. So the victory that believers have is a past victory that continues into the present.

When we as believers yield ourselves to the one who lives within us, we experience continual victory in our daily battles with the forces of evil. It may not always be a linear progression, but the direction will always be in the right direction.

That's a great promise that should bring comfort, assurance, and hope to us. Then verses 5 and 6 reiterate what John has already said in the first four verses.

They say, they, which are the false prophets, are of the world. Therefore, they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We, meaning true believers, are of God.

He who knows God hears us. He who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. The difference between false prophets and true believers is their origin.

[33 : 05] The use of the word translated world three times in this verse and six times in verses 1 through 5 only underscores the relationship between the deceivers and the prince of the world.

And the prince of the world, of course, we know is Satan. So the unbelievers speak continually from the world and their message reveals their source. The false prophet speech originates from and is empowered by the world's viewpoint and values and they draw the substance of their teaching then from the godless world.

That makes their message attractive to those who think like the world and their words entice and capture those for whom the world is their home. So the world listens to those who speak its own language.

We see that today, don't we? John's declaration in verse 6, though, is reflective of the teaching of Jesus. Listen to this quote from Jesus that comes from John 8, 47.

This is when Jesus was speaking to the disbelieving Pharisees and Jesus said, He who is of God hears God's words. Therefore, you do not hear because you are not of God.

[34 : 16] People who are not true believers resist sound doctrine. That doctrine doesn't make sense to them and it doesn't fit in their man-centered materialistic system of thought and view of the world.

We can see that in the history of the church, the apostolic doctrine has always been the means by which the Holy Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood can be effectively distinguished.

Tonight's passage, then, in 1 John 4, 1 through 6, gave us two tests of the spirit. One is the confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, who came in the flesh. The other is the acceptance of the teaching of the apostles.

So the application of tonight's passage is clear. False teachers are real. False teachers are recognizable and false teachers are refutable.

So those last two things especially should give us comfort as believers because even though false teachers are real, they're recognizable and they're refutable. So we as believers need to be aware

and alert to false teaching but we don't have to be afraid of it because those who have experienced the new birth with its indwelling of the Holy Spirit have a built-in check against false teaching.

[35 : 35] The Holy Spirit will lead us into sound doctrine for genuine Christians and that will be evidence that salvation has already occurred. True believers have nothing to fear because even Satan's host with their perversions can't take us out of the Lord's hand.

So in these verses just as we saw in 2, 18 through 27, protection against error or victory over it are guaranteed by sound doctrine and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that illumines our mind.

And that's why John can say in verse 4, you are of God, little children, and have overcome them because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.