

THE BOOK OF I JOHN

Lesson Six

True Christians Need Assurance From God, and Need to Test the Spirits To See if They Represent God

“My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.

“For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of 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 commandment. And he that keeps his commandments dwells in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us.

“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof you have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.

“You are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God: he that knows God hears us; he that is not of God hears not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.” I John 3:18 - 4:6

Christian Assurance

In verses 18-24, John continues to enlarge upon his definition of love as being a test of true Christianity. In doing so, he seeks to give assurance to his readers wherein they may have confidence to approach God in prayer. While our salvation ultimately depends on God Himself, John nevertheless insists that to consciously

enjoy this assurance we must continue to keep His commands to believe in Jesus and love one another. When we do this, the Spirit inwardly assures us of our spiritual position before God.

John says we can know we are in a true relationship with God by our deeds of action and truth. The false, antichrist teachers were saying they possessed the knowledge of the truth by special inner insights received by direct revelations from God. But their lives were models of selfishness and hatred. John countered this impression by claiming that the mark of truth is a lifestyle of high moral character and good deeds flowing out of our commitment to Christ.

Love for other Christians is a test of genuine membership in God's family. The existence of such love enables the believer to know with assurance that he is walking in the truth, and is confident to the point he can enjoy a prayer life with God. (cf. vs. 21, 22). In verses 19, 20, 21, John makes reference to the believer's heart. By this he means the entire moral consciousness of man. In our desire to live lives of high moral character and good deeds, we will often fall short of our own ideals, let alone God's. Sometimes the believer's heart will accuse him to the point he may question whether he is a true Christian or not. Satan is also known as the accuser of the brethren. (Revelation 12:10). John says there is a way to pacify or put to rest our troubled heart or conscience. It is through the knowledge that God understands our spiritual state better than we do. The human conscience is not the final judge in the matter. God is the final judge. He knows that we believe in Christ, that we strive to love our brothers, and we regret falling short. But the forgiveness found in His mercy is greater than our imperfections. Thus our hearts can be reassured not by our feelings, but by the knowledge that God knows us better than we know ourselves.

After Peter denied his Lord three times, Jesus later asked him three times if he loved Him. This grieved and upset the heart of Peter. He then said, **"Lord, you know all things** (God is greater): **you know that I love you. Jesus said unto him, 'Feed my sheep'"** (John 21:17). A knowledge that God knows that we still love Him even though we often fail Him, will assure our hearts to further serve Him. Thus it is through the means of objective knowledge rather than subjective feelings that our hearts can be assured.

When our hearts no longer condemn us, we can have confidence before God. This confidence leads to fruitfulness in prayer. When a Christian is confident of his place in God's family, regardless of any emotions of guilt or unworthiness, he can communicate with his Father in prayer with the assurance that he is being heard. John states it in absolute terms. **"We receive from him anything we ask."** (V. 22, NIV). This is another one of those astounding statements which ranks with the statements regarding the believer's sinlessness (3:6,9) and

his perfection in love (2:5, 4:17). John is teaching the same thing which he heard Jesus teach. In John 14:14, Jesus said, **“If you shall ask anything in my name, I will do it.”** Also in John 16:23 **“... whatsoever you shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.”** (cf. 15:16).

How are these passages to be understood? Some passages of Scripture seem to give assurance that we will receive anything for which we ask, (Matthew 7:7,8), but other passages place qualifications to answered prayer. The assurances of answered prayer assume a knowledge of the qualifications. First, answers to prayer are based on our obedience to God’s commands. John goes on to say in verse 22 that God answers prayer because **“we keep his commandments, and do those things which are pleasing in his sight.”** Second, this same letter requires the qualification of asking for things to be **“according to his will”** (5:14), not according to our selfish will. Third, we must ask in Jesus’ name (John 14:13; 16:23,26). Fourth, we must be abiding in Jesus (John 15:7, 16).

A life submitted to the will of God is the secret of a successful prayer life. The reason believers can expect answers to prayer is that, as far as they know, they are asking in accordance with the will of God. They certainly would know better than to ask for something contrary to His will. The result is that God gives them what they ask for, and if not, something better. There are many occasions in this life when we do not receive the answer we have expected. But when we arrive in heaven, we will learn that every time God answered in a way which was best for us. We must always trust God to do what is right. Believers can expect God’s help when they are one in agreement with His purposes.

The question now arises that if answered prayer is dependent upon keeping God’s commands, then what are those commands? John summarizes them up in the twin towers of his epistle: faith and love. We are to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another.

“Believe” occurs here for the first time in the epistle, and will be seen more and more as the issue between John and the apostate teachers. The false teachers do not love, but the reason they do not love is that God’s love is not in them because they have not truly believed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. To believe in Jesus Christ means in this context, to believe the gospel about Jesus, that He is God’s Son, that He came into this world of humanity to save men and women from their sins, and that by believing in Him, they can have eternal life. (John 3:16, 18). The joining of faith and love into a single command shows how closely connected the two are in John’s mind. Belief precedes love because it is the basis for love (3:16), but love is the expression of true belief.

John now mentions the person of the Holy Spirit for the first time in verse 24. The evidence that we abide in Christ is our doctrinal purity, our love for the brethren, and our obedience to His commands. The evidence He abides in us is the presence of His Spirit whom He has given us. Paul says that **“the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.”** (Romans 5:5).

Thus we can be assured that the Holy Spirit has come to make His home in us as evidenced by (1) our correct doctrine - **“believe on the name of His Son, Jesus Christ.”** (v. 23); (2) our love for the brethren - **“love one another”** (v. 23); (3) our obedience to His commands - **“keep His commands”** (v. 24).

Testing the Spirits - 4:1-6

“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.

“Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God: he that knows God hears us; he that is not of God hears not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.”

In these verses, John now moves from the test of love to take a second look at the test of doctrine or belief. The sections parallels that of 2:18-27 where he warned of the presence of antichrists who had been among them, but who had gone out from them. The Christian community to which John was writing was in the midst of controversy. The opponents to whom John was engaging were not professing pagans, but people who claimed to be Christians. Their goal was to place doubts in the minds of the people who were remaining in the church, and to lead them away from apostolic doctrine. In this type of setting, John needed to teach his readers how to discern between true and false teachers. He described that this could take place in two ways. First, by observing the content of their teaching in verses 1-3. Second, by the character of their hearers in verses 4-6.

John has stated that all believers have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (3:24) and they all have believed the truth concerning the person of God's Son, Jesus Christ (3:23). But there are other spirits with which to contend. There is the human spirit and an evil spirit. All of these seek a hearing from our human minds. The words, **"believe not every spirit"** set forth both a duty and a warning. Christians are to stop listening to every *"spirit,"* or spokesman, which claims to receive their message from a supernatural source. Not every spirit represents God. Instead of being gullible, they need to try or test the prophet who claims to speak as a mouth-piece for the Spirit of God. A large number of false prophets had already gone out from or abandoned the apostolic faith and modified their message to accommodate the spirit of the world, namely that which was described in 2:15-17.

How then are the spokesmen, claiming to represent God's truth, to be tested. First, by the content of their message. John lists two contrasting spirits that exist in the world. They are the Spirit of God (v. 2) and the spirit of antichrist (v. 3). These are described as **"he that is in you"** (Spirit of God) (v. 4), and **"he that is in the world"** (spirit of antichrist) (v. 4). John further describes these opposing spirits as **"the spirit of truth"** and **"the spirit of error"** in verse 6. So behind every human spokesman that is seen, lies an unseen superhuman spirit.

What separates a true spokesman of God from a false one? John says it is in what they believe or confess about Jesus Christ. What a person confesses about Jesus Christ exposes his spirit as being either a spirit of truth or a spirit of error. In John's conflict, it involved the question of the incarnation. Did Jesus come in the flesh or not? If a teacher has the Spirit of God dwelling in him, then he confesses the incarnation, the wonderful truth that God did become man and came to earth on a saving mission to redeem lost sinners. The Spirit of God cannot confess anything other than the truth, therefore every teacher who has the Spirit of God will confess the same truth. True Christianity can be examined by the objective doctrine it teaches. Right doctrine-- right Spirit, wrong doctrine--wrong spirit.

Now note the confession in detail in verse 2. The true teacher confesses **"Jesus Christ is come in the flesh"**.

- 1) The true teacher confesses Jesus. The name Jesus means "Savior". It is believing that Jesus Christ did come from God to seek and save men who were lost. He came to be the Savior of the world.
- 2) The true teacher confesses Christ. The name Christ means "Messiah", the Anointed One of God. It is believing that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament Scriptures; that He is

the fulfillment of all the prophecies of Scripture; that He is the Anointed Savior sent from God to the earth.

- 3) The true teacher confesses that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (3:23). It is believing that this Jesus, “who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God.” (Phil 2:6), came out of the dimension of the spiritual world into the dimension of the physical world, to save men in fulfillment of Scripture. It means that by His life, death, resurrection and exaltation to the throne of God, He now ever lives as a God-man to intercede for repentant sinners.

In contrast, the false teachers deny this confession. That is, they refuse to confess such about Jesus. In their actions they distort the Gospel. This departure from the truth of the Gospel is the spirit of the antichrist that they had heard was coming. The spirit of antichrist is the spirit seen in apostasy or departure from the apostolic faith. A sample of such a spirit or principle exists in every person who identifies himself as a Christian, but refuses to confess the true gospel of Christ Jesus. This is the antichrist, the falling away which John’s readers heard was coming. John says it was already occurring in the lives of the false prophets. John’s use of “it” rather than “he” indicates that in this context, he is referring to a class of persons who deny Christ, rather than a single person. John’s statement in 2:22 clarifies this. **“Who is a liar but he that denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is (the: Greek) antichrist that denies the Father and the Son.”** II John 7 is even clearer, **“For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a (the: Greek) deceiver and an (the: Greek) antichrist.”**

The false teachers could not only be identified by the content of their message, but by the character of their hearers. This is seen in verses 4-6. The fact that John’s readers had not left the apostolic faith proved they had overcome the teaching of the apostates and thus belonged to God. Their power to overcome, came not from their own natural willpower, but from the Holy Spirit indwelling enablement (v. 4). The spirit of error and the spirit of truth cannot coexist peacefully side by side. This is why apostates cannot fellowship with apostolic Christians. They must separate and form their own fellowship. These fellowships have a common bond. They are under the control of the world system. That system headed up by Satan as its ruler. It is that system John has described back in 2:15-17; the system built upon the creature’s pride and self-gratification. As we saw in those verses it expresses itself in three attitudes:

1. A desire for self sufficiency and control so that one can always “get his own way.”
2. The desire to “get everything I want” to enable one to get his own way;
3. The desire to be able to brag about one’s being and achievements so as to gain a reputation above that of others.

John begins verses 4, 5 and 6 with a personal pronoun which identifies three representative groups. “Ye” - his readers (v. 4); “they” - his opponents (v. 5); and “we” - John and other apostles (v. 6).

The false prophets had a worldly, man-centered message. They had taken the Gospel, removed its offensive elements, and restated it in such a way to make it acceptable to worldly-minded people. Its message allows the proud, self-gratifying spirit to use God as a means to advance its own temporal, earthly plans, purposes, and pursuits. It does not crucify the flesh and its lusts. Worldly-minded hearers select worldly-minded teachers. Paul instructed Timothy to be aware of this. In II Timothy 4:2-4, he charged Timothy to remain true to the doctrine that he had been taught. He said, **“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”**

A religious teacher can determine much about himself by observing what class of people are pleased with his teaching. This was especially true of Jesus. In John 8:47, He told a group of unbelieving Jews, who had just rejected His message, **“He that is of God hears God’s words: you therefore hear them not, because you are not of God.”**

As a representative of apostolic doctrine, John could say without apology, **“he that knows God hears us, he that is not of God hears not us.”** (v. 6). John knew that he believed the Gospel, loved God and His people, and obeyed God’s words of command. If this be admitted, it would then follow that those who feared and loved God would receive what he taught.

In conclusion, the type of people who welcome a message give a clue as to its nature. The proud, the rich, the ambitious, the sensual will insist on a message or ministry which enhances their desires. People who love truth will respond to a spirit characterized by truth; those who are deluded by error will respond to a spirit of delusion.