

Week 6: Test the Spirits

Hook

TRUE FAITH

Main Point: Those who know Jesus have His Spirit.

Teacher, arrive at your LifeGroup room early and remove or add five small items. You might take down a poster or a whiteboard marker caddy; perhaps you add a magnet or two on the whiteboard or bring a trinket from home that you place on a cabinet. Make it challenging.

Divide your class into groups and invite them to identify what is “off” in the room. Each correct answer is a point, the group with the most points wins.

Q: Which change was the most difficult to find?

Q: What strategy did you use to generate your answers (examples: “We examined wall by wall.” “We tried to recall last week and compared that mental image to the room.” “We took a peek in the classroom next door to compare.”)

Q: Today’s lesson will challenge believers to evaluate teachers, to “test the spirits.” How do you know if a teacher is from God or not?

RECAP: Last week, John returned to the same argument he made earlier in the letter, that children of God love others because God is love. This week, he continues that discussion and ends by repeating the same point, that those who love God will love others because God is love. Again, he makes a clear distinction between those who are “of the world” and those who are of Christ. He said we can tell the difference between true believers and the antichrists because of whose Spirit is in them. He reminded us that we have no need to fear these antichrists because Christ is greater than they are, so we have already overcome them. A lot of this letter can feel repetitive, but this was John’s way of driving home these basic points so these believers could have confidence that they really did belong to God, that they were really saved, and that they really were His children.

Week 6: Test the Spirits

Book

Main Point: Those who know Jesus have His Spirit.

1 John 3:19–24 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Those who belong to Jesus can have confidence before God.

Q: How can we know with confidence that we belong to God?

Q: What was John trying to reassure his readers they could trust?

This section begins with “by this we shall know...,” which means we need to look back and remind ourselves what “this” refers to – everything John said in verses 1–18:

- Because we don’t *abide* in sin but in righteousness
- Because we love other people the way God loves us

This is how we know we are children of God, not children of the Devil (v. 10). We don’t earn status by doing these things, but they are evidence of whose children we are. Just as children look and act like their human parents, so children of God look and act like God or Jesus.

John was reassuring his readers that they could have confidence that they really belonged to God, that they were “of the truth.” John had already contrasted those who are of the truth with those who are liars – the antichrists, those who deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:18–25). This is the confidence we can rest in – that Jesus is the Christ and that His righteousness is what saves us, not our own.

John reassured them that even when their hearts condemned them, they could have confidence that they really did belong to God. In the Bible, the “heart” is not just our emotions, but the entire inner self.¹ The condemnation of our hearts refers to that inner voice that can be so self-critical, especially when we mess up and fall short – “You can’t really be saved. You’re not good enough for God.”

Jeremiah said, “The heart is deceitful about all things, and desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9). Even when we condemn ourselves, God still says, “You are my precious child.” This is how John opened this chapter, saying God’s great love for us makes us His children (3:1). This is our very identity. Even when we mess up, we belong to Him. We will fall short at times, but generally, we abide in righteousness.

This is how we have confidence in Him and assurance of our salvation, which was one of John’s main goals in writing this letter (5:12–13). We don’t have to constantly worry that if we mess up, we’ll fall out of favor with God and lose our salvation. Our salvation is secure because it is based on Christ’s righteousness, holiness and perfection, not ours.

This is what the well-known hymn, “Blessed Assurance,” is all about. The lyrics came to Fanny Crosby, the blind hymnwriter with a deep faith, all at once when her friend Phoebe Knapp played a tune and asked her what it said to her.

At the time, the Holiness Movement was a popular subset of the Methodist Church. It focused so heavily on sanctification that they believed in a “second work of grace” called “entire sanctification” that made believers completely perfect, free from any sin. For some leaders of the movement, like Harry Jessop, this led to a belief that “believers cannot commit sin without forfeiting justification.”² This resulted in many believers questioning their salvation every time they sinned. But John wrote that we can know we are of the truth; we can even reassure our hearts when they condemn us.

We can rest in this truth: Jesus is the Christ. Our righteousness is not based on our deeds but on His righteousness given to us by grace through faith. God’s truth is greater than our hearts. So we can be assured of our salvation and be confident that when we come to Him in prayer, He hears us. Because we are precious children of a loving Father. It’s not about earning God’s favor so He’ll give us what we ask for; it’s about relationship. It’s about God’s love for us.

The rest of the passage is also about relationship. If we read it out of context, it may sound as if it’s saying we get what we ask for if we do what pleases Him (3:22). But we must keep in mind all that John has said so far in this letter. It’s about fellowship with God, abiding in Him, and our identity as His children. It’s not a point system. When we read closely, we see it. John said we know God abides in us because we have His Spirit. This is fellowship, relationship (3:24).

He said whoever keeps God’s commandments abides in God, but like always, keeping the commandments isn’t about earning our status; it’s evidence of the relationship we have with the Father (3:24). This is why we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him (3:22) – because we love Him. We want to please Him, just as children want to please their human parents.

It’s all about relationship, from the beginning of the chapter to the end. We are His precious children, so we can be assured that we will be with Him in heaven forever (5:13). We are His precious children, so we can be confident that He will give us everything we need like a good Father (Matthew 7:7–11). Because we are His precious children, His love abides in us and we can truly love others.

Q: Describe any times you may have struggled with the assurance of your salvation, when you wondered if you were really saved.

Q: Imagine you believed that every sin could cause you to lose your salvation. How would that affect your view of God? Your relationship with Him? How would it affect the way you walked through life with Him? How would it affect your prayer life?

Q: How does knowing that God is your loving Father affect all those things?

1 John 4:1–6 [Read]

Talking Point 2: We must test every spirit to see if it is from God.

Q: Why does God say test the “spirits” rather than speaking on a physical level?

Q: What contrasts did John create in this passage?

In the last verse of chapter 3, John said they could know they abide in God because they had God’s Spirit dwelling in them. Now he implored them not to believe “every spirit” (4:1). John was contrasting the Spirit of God with the spirit of the antichrist (4:3). He had already told his readers that many antichrists had come, not just one (2:18). Within each of these antichrists is the “spirit of the antichrist” in the same way believers have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them.

John was telling his readers that this wasn’t just an intellectual or theological problem, a disagreement about doctrine. This was spiritual warfare. There are two sides to this war, and they are opposed to each other. Christ and antichrist. We recognize those on each side by whether they confess Jesus as the way to the Father. Confession doesn’t just mean *saying* you believe Jesus is the way but also living as if you believe it, following Him. But these antichrists denied that Jesus was the Christ altogether (2:22).

The good news about this spiritual battle is that we are on the winning side. The Devil may be the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 2 Corinthians 4:4), but Jesus is the ruler of all things. The Spirit who dwells in us is greater than the spirit of the antichrist (4:4). Some days it may seem like Satan is winning. He certainly has power over this world (5:19). But we know who triumphs in the end. In fact, Jesus has already overcome Satan; He has already won the victory (Colossians 2:14–15). So John could say that we who are from God have already overcome these antichrists (4:4). We don’t have to fear them. We already have the victory in Christ.

But the world listens to these antichrists. The Devil still has power over the world. Those who know God listen to the apostles, but those who don’t know God listen to the voices of the world. Though the details may be different, this still happens today. There is a sharp contrast between what the world teaches about Jesus and what the Church teaches. We believe Jesus is the Son of God, that He rose from the dead and is alive, and that He is the only way to the Father. The world thinks He was a good religious teacher or that He never even lived at all. The world thinks there are many paths to God, if He exists at all. The Gospel is foolishness to the world, but to us who know Jesus, it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44). He is still lying to keep people from Jesus, and the world is still believing the lies. We must have discernment to test the spirits, to see if what people say is consistent with God’s Word. We must know God’s Word deeply so we can recognize the lies. The better we know the voice of Jesus, the more likely we will be able to say, “That doesn’t sound like something He would say.” It’s all about

relationship, fellowship, abiding in Christ. Those who know Jesus have His Spirit dwelling in them (3:24; 4:2). They belong to God. They recognize His voice (John 10:27).

Q: Describe any lies you have heard from our culture about Jesus, the Church, or the Gospel. How can we combat these lies?

Q: What do you think you need to study or learn more about in order to have the wisdom and discernment to test the spirits?

Q: John's use of the word "spirits" reminds us that this isn't only an academic endeavor, but a spiritual one. How else can we prepare besides study?

1 John 4:7–8 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Again, it comes back to love.

Q: Look over all the previous chapters. How many times did John use "love"?

Q: How is love connected to being able to test the spirits?

John returned to the same basic commandment – love one another – for the same reason, because love is from God. It is a refrain he repeated throughout all his writings, but especially in this letter. And he's not the only one. Of course, Jesus said that love is the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36–40; John 15:12). Paul said that nothing religious we do matters if we don't do it out of love (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). It always comes back to love.

John had just written that Jesus' commandment is to believe in Him and love one another (3:23). John had just said that the way we recognize true believers is by the way they love others (3:14–18). Again, just after he talked about testing the spirits to see who was really from God, he came back to love. This is the third and final time he discussed love in this letter, each time using it as the way to identify those who really know and love God. Another way to test the spirits.

It may seem silly that John continued to repeat this, and it may feel silly that we emphasize it in each lesson, but that is how integral love is to the very definition of being a follower of Jesus. It's simple logically. God is love, so those who have been born of God will love others. Yet it can be so hard to actually do. Because even though we have God's Spirit dwelling in us, even though we are growing in sanctification every day, we are still human. We still fall short. True *agape*, selfless love is not natural for human beings. It is not our default. To truly love requires the Holy Spirit's work in us. This is why John kept repeating it, why we must remind each other, and why we have to pray for a heart that loves the way God loves.

Q: Think through your day, week, month, year, etc. How often do you center your life on serving others versus your own wants and needs?

Q: In what ways do you find it hard to love others selflessly?

Q: Describe someone who has loved you selflessly. What kind of an impact did that make on your life?

Q: Describe how God has loved you. How can you show that kind of love to others?

Week 6: Test the Spirits

Took

Main Point: Those who know Jesus have His Spirit.

Teacher, choose an event with which most in your LifeGroup would be familiar (*The Gift of Christmas*, for example).

What one word would you use to describe the experience most accurately?

What one word do you think John would hope that people could use to describe Christians (answers: love, loving)?

Without answering aloud, what one word best describes you?

The Church is wonderfully diverse and yet, each member should be identified by his or her love. Consider the perspectives of those whom God has placed in your sphere of influence and ask yourself: Would he or she describe me as a loving person? If the answer is no, repent and make it right. Pray that the Lord would help you to see others as He does this week. Ask that He would aid you in demonstrating the love of Jesus.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on all the lies you hear from the world – about God, about Jesus, about church, about sin, about truth, about yourself, about everything. How can we combat those lies with the truth? Is there any hope of convincing others of the truth, or are they destined to believe the lies because they are “of the world”? How can we speak the truth in love? How can we most effectively impact other people with the truth without pushing them further away?

PRAY for the Lord to give you confidence when you come to Him in prayer. Picture God as a loving Father and imagine coming to Him to ask for what you need. Ask Him to show you how to pray for the things He would want you to pray for, that His desires would become your desires so that you pray for His will for your life.

ACT: FIGHT. Remember that our battle is with the *spirit* of the antichrist. Not with flesh-and-blood people, but with the spiritual realm that influences them. What do we need to fight spiritual battles? The armor of God, the “sword” of which is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:10–18). Make a list of all the lies you have heard that are fighting against

Jesus and the truth of the Gospel, then find at least one Scripture passage that combats those lies.

NEXT TIME in 1–3 John and Jude: Next week, John’s letter continues to talk about love, both God’s love for us shown through Christ’s sacrifice and how we should love each other that same way. It’s all about love. Not the mushy, gushy, emotional feeling kind of love, but the true love-in-action, laying-down-your-life, selfless, *agape* love of Jesus.

¹ *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon* (Biblesoft, 2002).

² Harry Edward Jessop, *Foundations of Doctrine in Scripture and Experience: A Student’s Handbook on Holiness* (Kessinger Publishing, 2010).