

Last week we finished up chapter three in our series in 1 John, but the last verse had part of it that leads into today’s passage. That is actually one of the challenges about preaching through 1 John: where to begin and end each reading, because everything connects together quite closely. It’s not like a parable that Jesus teaches, where there’s a definitive end. But even compared to some of Paul’s letters, 1 John just feels like a tangled web of yarn where everything is connected all over the place.

The other challenge is that there are a few themes that are repeated throughout the letter...it’s like he’ll write about it in one spot, connect it to something else, connect that to something else, then another connection...then come back to the original thing because he realized he didn’t say as much about it as he had intended to. I almost wonder if John had ADHD or something! He really could have benefited from living in the age of computers where he could cut and paste, and edit his stuff without having to start over on a new piece of expensive parchment paper.

So, today’s flows out of last week’s passage, but also re-hashes some themes we’ve seen before, so I’m giving you a lightly edited sermon I preached 5 weeks ago. Just kidding. Verse 24 of chapter 3 reads, “The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.” Then today’s passage begins in Chapter 4:1 following up on that. We’ll start with the first 6 verses... **(1 John 4:1-6)**

So, John is fond of referring to the Holy Spirit as simply the “Spirit” or “The Spirit of God.” We see that throughout his NT writings. John tells in at the end of chapter 3 that we know God lives in us because of the Spirit he has given us. He doesn’t say anything more beyond that. Nothing specific about what it is to look for to know that the spirit is in us – not a particular gift of the spirit, not a particular fruit of the spirit...nothing. And there is wisdom in that, lest we make our Christian faith, and determining who is part of the faith, all about that one thing had he named it. Instead, Scripture tells us of a

number of Gifts of the Spirit – as many as 28 or so; and nine fruit of the spirit. There are a myriad of ways the Spirit is seen in a person’s life, but it is all from the same Holy Spirit.

So: Then John encourages them (us) not to believe every spirit, but to test them and see if they are from God. This language of “test the spirits” sounds really otherworldly and hyper-spiritual. But when you look at the whole of what he says here in these verses, he is specifically talking about the teaching and preaching that people might give. Is the teaching and preaching of people who are seeking influence in our lives in line with the Spirit of God, or not? If it’s not, then they are false teachers, and the spirit that is in them is of the antichrist. We saw this term earlier, you may recall. He wrote in 2:18 that “may antichrists have come.” We think of the antichrist as a word for the devil, but John uses it in regards to anyone who stands opposed to God, and perhaps especially for those who try and persuade others away from Jesus, and away from the Spirit of truth.

So, what we see here is that discernment is necessary because there are “many anti-christs” or “false prophets” as he calls them here. In other words, not everyone who claims to speak from God, or even speak of God, really does. **We are not to be naïve and must, rather, test anyone who speaks; And what we test them against is Scripture.** Does what they say square up with what we already know God has said in Scripture? This is why nearly every single sermon I ever preach is simply an exposition of a Bible passage – whether it’s three or four verses or 12 like today. I rarely preach topical sermons or topical sermon series, even though I give every sermon a title that could be construed as “topical” and two or three times per year we’ll have a sermon series that is “topical” or maybe connects with something in culture – like The Gospel at the Movies or a series on our character, or a Christmas series like “unwrap your gifts” or something like that. Let me let you on a little secret: all that stuff – the titles of sermons, the series titles...they’re just window-dressing. Yes, they are designed to convey the basic nature of the message or the series...but they are also designed to pique a person’s interest, to get someone’s attention. But the foundation of every message and every series is going to be a passage of Scripture and what it has to say to us. And John is saying, that’s what we ought to do.

Specifically, John says we can “know the Spirit of God,” being able to recognize that a certain message is in line with and prompted by the Holy Spirit by noticing whether or not the one speaking affirms the incarnation of Jesus, the Messiah. **If someone does not affirm the full truth of who Jesus is, this person is not from God.** Indeed, this person, rather than being animated by the Holy Spirit, is animated by the spirit of the antichrist.

One very important implication of this passage is that it is not enough for a teacher to be sincere—contrary to what many think today. Deeply held belief does not make that belief right. You can believe all you want that USC is superior to the UW on the football field this year...but that is a false belief. **In matters of faith: Doctrine does matter. Especially: what you believe about Jesus matters.** We talked about that quite a bit last week, and if you weren't here, and if you aren't sure what you believe about Jesus, I would encourage you to get a copy of last week's message from the lobby, our website, or watch it online.

After mentioning the dire reality of false prophets posing as Christian teachers, another term of endearment in verse 4 (“little children”) marks a move to comfort and encouragement. We've see John address his audience as “children” in this letter before, in fact, this is the 1,523rd time. ☺ Ok...not actually that many, but it's been a lot, right? Probably 10 times so far. These children are connected to God (unlike false teachers), and as a result, they have overcome the deceptive world which seeks to harm them. Christians overcome this world not due to their own strength but because “God in us” is greater than the one who leads this world against God's rightful rule.

In verse 5, he writes that these false teachers are “from the world,” belonging to the realm of rebellion against God. The result is that others who are against God willingly receive their message. In this verse, there's an element of comparing the church, particularly the church to whom he writes, to the world. In doing this, John warns against considering the size of one's following as a measure of truth – the church is small compared to the world, right? Just because many people follow a certain teacher does not mean they are right. Taylor Swift has 274 million Instagram followers. That doesn't

mean she's "right" in everything she says. I know I just burst the bubble of every teenage girl in the room. I'm sorry/not sorry.

Because even inside the church, there can be false teachers – and that's really what he's warning against here. As one author puts it, **"The 'world' will flock to supposed Christian teachers who tell them what they want to hear...Error may gain a crowd while truth walks alone, but truth will be determined by its adherence to God not by the size of its following"** (Ray Van Neste, *1 John: A Commentary*). We struggle with this "bigger is better" mentality even inside of the church sometimes, presuming that a larger church is better or more right, or more "successful", teaches deeper Biblical truth, and makes more faithful and resilient disciples of Jesus, than a smaller one. That is certainly not the case, and we want to make sure that the people whose voices, teaching, and writing is "in us" lines up with Scripture.

So, who is in you? **Who's teaching, who's word, who's influence, is in you and shaping you?** We want to make sure that it is the Spirit of God, through faith in Jesus, that is in us. We know the Spirit is, if our lives, and the teaching being poured into us, lines up with what Scripture tells us about Jesus, who we are and what we are to be about. Are we, and those who influence us, in line with God's word? If so, then the Spirit is at work in us. Doesn't mean we're perfect and got it all together exactly right...but the Spirit will continue to work on us and nurture us and shape us to bring us deeper into the truth of God. Let's continue on, reading **1 John 4:7-13**.

Having discussed the need for vigilance against false teaching, John now, in verses 7-13, reminds them of the need for love. This theme carries on into next week's passage (imagine that – overlap from one Sunday to the next!) and so we'll touch on this briefly today and pick up on it more next Sunday. Too easily love can be forgotten in an overzealous effort to defend the truth against error. Some Christians are so consumed with the truth, that love is left out of the equation. John never allows his hearers to forget that the "Spirit of truth" is always connected to love.

Once again, he calls them "beloved." "Dear Friends" (as we read) actually is a little weak in its translation. Its root word is "agape" – this unconditional

love of God. These are the “beloved” of God (the *agapaetoi*), and beloved by John as well. Then he returns to a theme we’ve seen before, about loving one another. **We see here that love is essential to the nature of God; so, a person cannot be a child of God without taking on this family resemblance.** We might say that love is the distinguishing mark of Christians, which is why it is a terrible tragedy when the Church presents a different face to the world.

Now, John is not saying here, such as in verse 7, that only Christians can be kind and loving; certainly non-Christians can be as well. Christians are not the only ones who can love other people. By the same token when he writes, “whoever loves has been born of God” that does not mean that anyone who does a kind or loving deed knows God regardless of whether or not they believe in Jesus. That claim would directly contradict the previous section and even his whole letter. Knowing and trusting Jesus is foundational to knowing God. **The love written of here is not mere “niceness” or kind deeds, but a distinctly Christian, self-sacrificial love that is rooted in Jesus and his love for us.**

The fact that “God is love” is an incredible truth which is also often misconstrued and misused. It does not mean that anything we might call love is approved by God. Love is defined for us in Scripture. Additionally, saying that “God is love” does not reduce God to an emotion any more than the statement “God is light” in 1 John 1:5 reduces God to certainly elemental particles. This statement that God is love shows us that love is a fundamental aspect of God’s nature. **All that God does is ultimately loving.** God does *have* wrath...God does discipline and correct people...but he *is* love, and he has shown it most concretely in Jesus Christ, who died as an atonement for our sins. Jesus is the one who paid the price to wash away our sins and bring us back into relationship with God our Heavenly Father. Jesus’s atoning death on the cross, this extreme act of love, is what does this. And it has happened because God is love. We then respond in love back to him – imperfectly so – and for one another as John writes of here; and as Scripture teaches elsewhere, we are to love the people of the world so they might come to know the love of God as well.

So, is the love of God in you? Is the truth of God's word in you? **We want to live in this truth, and do so in a way that reflects the love of God to one another in tangible ways as well as the world around us so they'd be drawn to Jesus.** I said at the start that John didn't identify any one particular thing about the Spirit's work in our lives that we can identify as the marker of the Spirit. And again, that's good because Scripture elsewhere tells us there are a variety of gifts of the Spirit and fruit of the Spirit. But, he comes awfully close here, with verse 13, with "love" being the marker. It's not a wishy-washy love and defined however we want. Rather, it is defined by the truth of God's love revealed in Scripture. It is rooted in Him, His Word, and what Jesus has done for us. Jesus has modeled this love for us. He modeled it in his birth because he left the heavenly realms with love as his motivator; He modeled it in his life through his teaching and the miracles where love continued to be his motivator; He modeled it in his death and his resurrection where love again continued to be his motivator.

So, let's make sure that those who influence us are rooted in Scripture, so that what is in us – what is influencing us, teaching us, shaping us – would be of the Lord, and of his Spirit. And may we then be a conduit of that to the world, living our lives marked by a Godly, biblical kind of love – for God, for each other, and for others in our lives where we live, work and play. And we hope and pray that all of who we are and all that we do would glorify, and magnify God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let's pray...Amen.