

Testing the Spirits and Living in God's Love

1 John 4:1–21

At the end of the previous chapter John said, “And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (First John 3:24, NKJV). God has not left the believer guessing about whether He is present and working. The Holy Spirit is God’s seal upon our lives and God’s pledge that He will finish what He has begun.

Paul calls the Spirit “the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession” (Ephesians 1:14, NKJV). In other words, God has put His down payment on you. You belong to Him. And the presence of the Spirit is not merely a doctrine—it becomes a lived reality: conviction, comfort, strength, illumination, and a growing desire for holiness.

But the moment you talk about spiritual reality, you also need discernment. So John begins chapter 4 with a warning that is as needed today as it was then:

“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” (First John 4:1, NKJV).

1. A Call to Discernment

John does not tell us to be gullible. He does not tell us to accept every “spiritual” claim because it sounds religious or feels inspiring. He says, *test it*. Why? Because false prophets are real, and deception rarely comes with a warning label.

Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 7:15, NKJV). They look harmless. They may use Christian vocabulary. They may quote Scripture. In fact, that is often what makes them dangerous—because error is most persuasive when it rides on the back of truth.

The enemy’s strategy is rarely to deny everything. He is content with ninety percent truth if he can slip in the one poison drop that changes the message.

So how do we test the spirits? John gives us clear, objective criteria. Not gut feelings. Not popularity. Not charisma. Not the size of the crowd.

2. The First Test: What Do They Say About Jesus?

“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God” (First John 4:2, NKJV).

This is not mere lip-service. It is confession that embraces the truth of who Jesus is: the eternal Son who truly came as man. God did not send an angel. God did not send a philosophy. God sent His Son into our humanity.

“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” (First John 4:3, NKJV).

This is one of the clearest dividing lines in the spiritual world. Error always stumbles over Christ. False systems may speak about God, morality, destiny, spirituality, angels, even the Bible—but when you press them on the identity of Jesus, the answers become evasive, reduced, or distorted.

John says the spirit behind such teaching is not neutral—it is antichrist. Not necessarily “the” final antichrist, but the same spirit that opposes the true Christ and replaces Him with a counterfeit.

Christian faith rises or falls on this: Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh. And He did not come merely to inspire us, but to save us.

3. Courage for the Believer: You Are Not Outmatched

“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” (First John 4:4, NKJV).

Christian, you are not powerless in a confusing age. You do not need to live intimidated by deception. The Holy Spirit who indwells you is greater than every spirit of error operating in the world.

John adds:

“They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them” (First John 4:5, NKJV).

False teaching tends to be popular, because it often flatters human pride, excuses sin, or promises blessing without repentance. It speaks the language of the world, and the world applauds.

But John draws a sharp contrast:

“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” (First John 4:6, NKJV).

Truth has a certain ring to it for those who belong to God. Not because believers are smarter, but because the Spirit bears witness to the truth.

4. The Second Test: Does It Produce Love?

After the doctrinal test comes the moral and relational fruit test:

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (First John 4:7–8, NKJV).

John is not talking about sentimental feelings or shallow tolerance. He is speaking of the love that comes from God’s nature and is produced by God’s Spirit. Love that acts. Love that serves. Love that forgives. Love that tells the truth. Love that moves toward need.

Spiritual gifts do not prove spirituality. Religious experiences do not prove the Spirit’s presence. The clearest evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in a life is the fruit of love.

If what we call “spirituality” produces pride, coldness, cruelty, division, and bitterness, something is wrong at the root.

5. The Cross: Where Love Was Proven

“In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him” (First John 4:9, NKJV).

John tells us where love becomes visible: not in nature, not in good vibes, not in self-esteem, not in human romance—but in the sending of the Son.

“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (First John 4:10, NKJV).

God did not wait for you to become lovable. He loved you in your sin. And love took action.

Jesus saved us when He shed His blood on the cross. That is not a religious slogan; it is the center of everything. And the resurrection declares that He is God, Savior and Lord—because death could not hold Him, and His sacrifice was accepted.

If you ever doubt God’s love, do not interpret His love by your circumstances. Interpret your circumstances by His love. The cross is the final, settled proof.

6. The Obligating Power of Grace

“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (First John 4:11, NKJV).

Grace does not produce laziness; it produces likeness. If God has forgiven me an unpayable debt, I cannot turn around and choke my brother over a small offense. When mercy truly lands in the heart, it changes how we treat people.

John says something profound:

“No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us” (First John 4:12, NKJV).

People may not see God with their eyes, but they can see the evidence of His presence when His people love one another in practical, sacrificial ways. Love becomes a living testimony.

7. Assurance: The Spirit and the Confession

“By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit” (First John 4:13, NKJV).

“And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world” (First John 4:14, NKJV).

“Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (First John 4:15, NKJV).

Christianity is not merely ethical improvement. It is fellowship with God through the Son, by the Spirit. And that fellowship produces a confession—Jesus is the Son of God—and a transformation—love begins to rule where selfishness once ruled.

“And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (First John 4:16, NKJV).

8. Perfected Love and Freedom from Fear

“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world” (First John 4:17, NKJV).

When love is being perfected in us—when we are resting in what Christ has done and walking in the reality of His life—fear loses its grip.

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment” (First John 4:18, NKJV).

Fear torments because it imagines abandonment, rejection, and doom. But love reassures. If you truly know you are loved by God in Christ, then even painful seasons are no longer proof of God’s absence. They become places where God will prove His faithfulness.

And John anchors it:

“We love Him because He first loved us” (First John 4:19, NKJV).

God is always the initiator. We respond. We do not manipulate God into blessing through religious techniques. We worship because He is worthy. We obey because He has loved us. We give because He has given.

9. The Unavoidable Test: Love for Your Brother

“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (First John 4:20, NKJV).

This is direct, but it is mercy. John refuses to let us live in contradiction.

“And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (First John 4:21, NKJV).

You cannot separate love for God from love for people made in His image. If my heart is hard toward my brother, I need to stop pretending everything is fine spiritually and come back to the Lord for real heart work.

Practical Application

- Test what you hear. Ask: What does this teaching say about Jesus Christ? Does it honor Him as the Son of God come in the flesh? Does it point to His cross and resurrection as the center?
- Test what it produces. Does it cultivate love, humility, purity, and obedience—or pride, division, and indulgence?
- Let the cross settle the question of God’s love. When the enemy whispers, “If God loved you...,” answer by looking to Calvary.
- Make love practical. Start where you are: forgive, serve, give, reconcile, speak truth with gentleness, and refuse bitterness.

A Challenge for Believers

Believer, do not be content with correct words about love while harboring hatred, resentment, or cold indifference. Let God’s love be perfected in you. Bring the hard relationships into the light. Ask the Holy Spirit to produce what you cannot manufacture. Then take one concrete step of love this week—one phone call, one apology, one act of generosity, one choice to forgive.

An Invitation to Non-Believers

If you are not in Christ, the greatest proof of God’s love is already in history: “God... sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (First John 4:10, NKJV).

Jesus saved us when He shed His blood on the cross. He rose again, and the resurrection declares that He is God, Savior and Lord.

Today, you can stop running, stop resisting, and come into the love of God. Confess your sin to Him. Turn to Jesus Christ. Believe that He died for you and rose again. Ask Him to forgive you and make you new. God is not offering you a theory—He is offering you life, fellowship, and eternal hope through His Son.