

March 24, 2024 (Lesson 4)

GUARDING GOD'S TRUTH

1. **God Is Greater Than Our Feelings** (1 John 3:19-24)
2. **Learn to Discern God's Truth** (1 John 4:1-6)
3. **Hold to the Truth About Christ** (2 John 1:7-11)

Central Truth: Christians must discern between truth and error.

Focus: Perceive the dangers of deception and walk in truth.

Evangelism Emphasis: God's truth is found in salvation and new life through Jesus Christ.

Golden Text: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

The church in John's day had to grapple with discerning between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. Some deceivers who operated in the spirit of antichrist had infiltrated the church, and believers had to be on guard against them. No doubt, they were smooth talkers who made their message seem very acceptable. The trouble is, they denied the most cardinal truth of the Christian faith: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God come in the flesh.

False teachers of apostolic times were denying the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, ascension, and intercession of Jesus Christ. These truths are the components of the Gospel. This was a life-or-death struggle. The denial of these glorious truths would undermine all hope.

In 2024, gigantic struggles related to the faith are still going on in Christendom. We too must be on guard, lest we fall prey to those who would lead us astray. Some forms of communication—including podcasts, social media, and television—offer such a variety of interpretations of the Scripture that we can be left utterly confused about what is truth and what is error.

Three ways to be able to discern between truth and error include: (1) *Live close to God.* Once we have tasted His goodness and grace and experienced His loving-kindness in our life, we will not be so easily drawn into error. (2) *Be sensitive to the Holy Spirit.* When the Holy Spirit lives in us and in the

one presenting the message to us, our spirits agree. We can recognize a right spirit and identify with it. (3) *Know the truth*. Knowing the truth necessitates reading and studying the Bible. If we don't know what God says is truth, it makes us vulnerable to believing a lie.

1. GOD IS GREATER THAN OUR FEELINGS

A. Belonging to the Truth (1 John 3:19-22)

19 And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. 20 For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. 21 Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. 22 And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.

It is not enough to only say we love one another; we must demonstrate our love “in deed and in truth” (v. 18). Then we know we belong to the truth (v. 19). When that bond of love operates in our life, we can be assured we are walking in the favor of God. There may be times when we struggle with our standing with God because of past sins. Satan stands ready to point an accusing finger at us, causing us to doubt our relationship with the Lord. But “God is greater” than any accusation Satan may bring against us (v. 20). When God, who knows us better than we know ourselves, forgives us for our wrongdoing, He also lifts the guilt from our heart and gives us peace within (v. 21). When that guilt is gone, we can come boldly to the throne of grace believing He will meet our every need.

John gives us two reasons why our prayers are answered (v. 22). The first reason is because we obey the Lord's commandments. When we obey His commandments, we walk in His will. Having resigned ourselves to the will of God, our prayers are based on our faith in the wisdom and power

of God to bring the desired result. Turning the matter over to Him, we wait patiently for His response.

The second reason God answers our prayers is because we do things that please Him. Our relationship with Him is genuine, without pretense or hypocrisy. What an incentive this gives us to live righteously and love God unreservedly! God honors such a life and attitude and bestows His blessings richly.

The Scripture makes it clear that whatever we ask according to His will, in the name of Jesus, for His sake, and in faith, we will receive. Jesus promised: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8). Later in his writing, John reaffirmed this truth: “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him” (1 John 5:14-15 NKJV).

§ *What should give us “confidence toward God,” and why (vv. 19-21)?*

§ *Who can expect to have their prayers answered (v. 22)?*

B. Living in Fellowship With Jesus (1 John 3:23-24)

23 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. 24 And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.

John sums up our duty as it relates to keeping Christ’s commandments in two words: *believe* and *love* (v. 23). John Wesley observed this command to believe and love “is the greatest and most

important command that ever issued from the throne of glory. If this be neglected, no other can be kept: if this be observed, all others are easy.”

To believe in Jesus’ name is to believe He is the Son of God and He stands in a relationship with God like no other. He alone can show us the Father and demonstrate by His life what the Father is like. And, He alone has paid the price for our redemption. Because of His sacrifice on Calvary, we who believe in Him are redeemed by His precious blood, restored to favor with God, and made partakers of the divine nature.

Belief and *love* go hand in hand. Both are the will of God, and both are commanded by Him. They represent right belief and right conduct and are a test of the true believer. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35 NKJV). The love we show to one another is to be modeled after the love Christ has for us. This love puts others first and is quick to forgive others.

Love may be considered the cardinal virtue of the Christian life. More than any other characteristic, it distinguishes believers and identifies them as followers of Christ. Love so permeates the Christian life that it is unthinkable to claim to be a Christian when it is absent. No trait is more Christlike than love.

Verse 24 says as God’s children, we dwell in God, and God in us. This is evident by our conduct: keeping the Lord’s commandments. Those who conscientiously obey God’s commandments enjoy a vital relationship with Christ and the Father. The Apostle Paul affirmed that relationship when he spoke of Christ dwelling “in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length

and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17-19 NKJV).

What a marvelous thought that Christ dwells in us in such fashion as to influence every aspect of our daily life! It is almost beyond our comprehension that we can live in such a close relationship with Him. The Lord will do for us whatever His perfect wisdom and goodness deems best to enable us to grow in grace and in our knowledge of Him. That is how He deals with His faithful children.

The abiding of the Father and the Son in us, and us in them, is affirmed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This is the first mention of the Holy Spirit in this letter. Both the Father and the Son are involved in bestowing the gift of the Spirit. Jesus said the Father sends the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ name (John 14:26), and Jesus said He would send the Spirit from the Father (15:26).

The Holy Spirit abides within to assist us in the exercise of our faith and every other grace. He inspires us to confess before others that Jesus is the Son of the living God. He provides the common bond that enables us to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Furthermore, He empowers us to live righteously. Apart from the indwelling of the Spirit, we are incapable of carrying out these distinguishing marks of the Christian life.

Love and Obey

Love God, and He will dwell with you. Obey God, and He will reveal to you the truth of His deepest teachings.—Frederick W. Robertson

2. LEARN TO DISCERN GOD’S TRUTH

A. Discerning False Prophets (1 John 4:1-3)

1 Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. 2 Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: 3 And every spirit that

confesseth 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.

The presence of false prophets is nothing new. The Old Testament gives us many examples of those who pretended to be what they were not. The criteria for determining the difference between a true prophet and a false prophet was simple: If a prophecy came to pass, it came from a true prophet. If it did not come to pass, the speaker was a false prophet (Deut. 18:21-22). The same test was true in New Testament times and is true in our time.

John admonishes his readers not to take the messages they hear for granted, but rather to test the spirits to see if the speakers are of God. Is the speaker speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, or is his inspiration coming from another spirit? When the Apostle Paul preached at Berea, the people searched the Scriptures to see if the message they had heard conformed to the Word of God (Acts 17:10-11). We should be equally diligent to determine that what we are hearing is in line with the Gospel, and also if the speaker is in harmony with God.

The test John wanted his readers to use was the speaker's attitude toward Jesus Christ (1 John 4:1-2). Does this individual believe Jesus Christ was a real flesh-and-blood human being and at the same time the Son of God? If he does not believe Jesus was both human and divine, he is not a true prophet. If his faith is anchored in Christ, fully accepting every aspect of His being, the prophet and his message are to be accepted.

Those who deny Jesus was all He said He was were false prophets inspired by the "spirit of antichrist"—a spirit that existed even in John's day (v. 3). The end-time Antichrist will refuse to acknowledge Jesus Christ and will set himself up as the real Christ. That spirit has been present in every age. But no matter how smooth or charismatic or charming or persuasive someone might be,

if they do not embrace Christ and His message completely, they must be recognized as a false prophet.

§ *How can a Christian “test the spirits” (v. 1 NIV)? Why is this necessary?*

§ *To be a Christian, what must a person believe and confess concerning Jesus Christ (vv. 2-3)?*

B. Belonging to God (1 John 4:4-6)

4 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. 5 They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. 6 We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.

How do believers overcome false teachers and false teaching? First, we do so by the grace of God. If we belong to God and truly depend on Him, He will enable us to be overcomers.

Second, we do so by remaining steadfast in the faith. False teachers soon learn we will not be turned away from the truth, so they depart. At times it might seem truth is in retreat and error has the ascendancy, but in the end, truth will prevail.

Third, the Spirit within us—the anointing that abides in us—is greater than the spirit of error that is in the world. The spirit of error emanates from the devil himself. While we cannot defeat the devil in our own strength, we become conquerors through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. He illuminates our minds, leads us into all truth, and teaches us how to apply the truth to our daily lives. The spirit of evil may be strong, but the Holy Spirit is stronger.

The world embraces false teachers because they speak their language. Jesus told some unbelievers, “Anyone who belongs to God listens gladly to the words of God. But you don’t listen because you don’t belong to God” (John 8:47 NLT). The Apostle Paul said, “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them,

because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14 NKJV). How blessed we are to have learned this truth and therefore trust the Spirit to guide us into all truth. This is something the world can never experience.

In 1 John 4:6, John speaks for himself and for those who teach the same doctrines he did, saying, “We are of God.” It was a declaration they could easily defend. Their allegiance to God was evident by their holy lives and supported by the purity of their doctrine. Their message and their ministry centered on Jesus Christ, whom they embraced as the Son of God and the Savior of the world. When they claimed they belonged to God, they were not being boastful but truthful. They understood God had chosen them, called them, and sent them forth to spread the Gospel.

When the apostles went out to represent the Christian faith, they spoke of the things that pertain to God and truth. Contrarily, worldly people speak a language the world understands and accepts, which contradicts God and truth. When the true messenger of God speaks, the message rings true to those who have the Holy Spirit abiding within. The Spirit of God in them recognizes the truth and bears witness to it.

So, by the grace of God and the Spirit of God within, we as believers have the ability to discern between truth and error. Since we have that ability, we can distinguish between true ministers of the Gospel and false teachers. Sometimes this distinction can be made just by observing who their followers are. Those who operate by the spirit of the world will be embraced by the world; those who minister through the Spirit of God will have the approval of those who know Christ and walk worthy of Him.

Christ’s Victory Is Ours

God has defeated Satan through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through this overwhelming victory, God has also empowered you to overcome any temptation to sin and has

provided sufficient resources for you to respond Biblically to any problem of life. By relying on God's power and being obedient to His Word, you can be an overcomer in any situation.—John C. Broger

3. HOLD TO THE TRUTH ABOUT CHRIST

A. Beware of Deceivers (2 John 1:7-9)

7 For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. 8 Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. 9 Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.

In his second letter, John repeats his former warning about the coming of messengers who represent the spirit of antichrist—messengers who are deceivers whose mission is to lead people astray. These messengers refuse to acknowledge Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

John said these deceivers went “into the world” with their false teachings (v. 7). As the apostles went forth proclaiming the truth, these “antichrists” went out to spread a message based on falsehoods. They presented themselves as Christian missionaries when they were impostors. So whatever churches they visited in their travels, they sought to create confusion and raise doubts about the divinity of Christ.

The Bible reveals Jesus did not become the Son of God at His birth nor at His baptism; neither did He cease to be the Son of God at His death on the cross. He is the Son of God from eternity to eternity. He is Christ come in the flesh, both man and God from the time of His birth and forevermore.

In verse 8, John warned the believers not to be taken in by the spirit of error and thus lose the fruit of their labors in the Kingdom. Rather than accepting and spreading the false teaching they are hearing, they need to continue to declare the doctrine they have heard and embraced from the beginning of their Christian sojourn. If they remain faithful to the truth, they will receive the full benefits of the rewards due to them. John's message agrees with the teaching of the Apostle Paul, who wrote, "Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. . . . If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward" (1 Cor. 3:8, 14 NKJV).

John said whoever turns away from the teachings of Christ, or adds to His teachings more than He intended, has transgressed against God and cannot call Him their God and Father. The Apostle Paul strongly warned the Galatians, "Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you" (1:8 NLT).

This danger of denying Christ is just as real today as it was in John's day. There are multitudes of people who declare they believe in God and express their allegiance to Him, but who reject Jesus Christ. No true follower of God can take that position, because Biblical faith is founded on the incarnation, atonement, and finished work of Christ that makes salvation possible. To believe otherwise is not enlightenment, but darkness. However, those who remain faithful to the truth enjoy a rich relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, as well as a vital communion with God as their Father.

Persuasive Portrait

As the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle build up to give a pattern, which no single piece can show on its own, so the New Testament titles [for Christ] build up to give an overall picture, which no single

title can adequately disclose. Taken collectively, they build up into a rich, deep, and powerfully persuasive portrait of Christ as which are reserved for God, and attributes actions to Him which are the privilege of God alone.—Alister E. McGrath

B. Reject False Teachers (2 John 1:10-11)

10 If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: 11 For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.

False teachers are not to be allowed to speak from the Christian pulpit or to be encouraged to enjoy the fellowship of the church. They are to be denied the hospitality common to true believers, both publicly and privately. Furthermore, they are not to be extended a greeting that suggests they have the blessing of the church upon their departure. To say to them “God be with you” may suggest they have gained some favor in the church. It can also be a stumbling block to weaker Christians who may conclude they can embrace some of their teaching or even become followers of these false teachers. The apostle’s language could not be clearer. We are not only to reject the false teaching, we are also to reject the false teacher. To do less than this is to identify with the false teacher and to give him or her a platform to continue to spread their false teachings. In short, it is to become a partner with them in their evil ways.

Irreparable damage has been done to local churches when wolves dressed in sheep’s clothing have been allowed to remain in the midst of the flock, propagating their erroneous message and perusing their chaotic ways. Churches have been split, lifelong friends have become alienated, and sometimes churches have been forced to close because leaders of the congregation failed to deal with the disrupters and deceivers. No wonder John is so harsh in his denunciation of those who pretend to be followers of Christ but who are acting in the spirit of antichrist.

§ *How should the church and individual Christians respond to false teachers?*

KNOW THE TRUTH

To recognize false teaching, it is necessary to be familiar with the truth. Are you knowledgeable enough with the teachings of Christ to know when they are being misrepresented? Do you live close enough to Christ and are you sensitive enough to the Holy Spirit that you can discern between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error? Though he or she may be smooth-talking and clever, can you sense when an individual is a deceiver? If you can, what a blessing you are to the kingdom of God!

Daily Devotions

- M. Pharaoh's Lack of Integrity (Exodus 9:25-35)
- T. Discerning God's Way (Job 34:1-12)
- W. Judgment Against False Prophets (Jeremiah 23:25-32)
- T. Revelation From the Father (Matthew 16:13-17)
- F. Let No One Deceive You (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4)
- S. Be on Your Guard (2 Peter 3:14-18)