

Living in God's Love (Part Three)

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[0 : 0 0] we've been working our way through John's first letter since January. John's purpose for writing this letter is to assure his readers that they know God and are known by him. John gives us three tests that we can use to determine if we know him. Right love, right obedience, and right belief. If we know God, we will love our brothers and sisters.

If we know God, we obey God. And if we know God, we confess the correct beliefs about Jesus. After John states each of these tests, he then begins to restate them and develop them, each time stating them a little bit differently. And in this manner, John's letter reminds me of a piece of classical music where at the beginning of a piece, the themes will be stated. And as the piece develops, the themes develop and change and mingle. And each time the theme sounds new.

Mozart has a piece of music, which is a theme in variations based on the melody that we know as Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. And so he states the melody, and then he states it, I think it's 12 more times. And each time you hear it, it's different. And so sometimes it sounds like you're on a playground, or sometimes it sounds like you're in a ballroom, or then you're at a funeral, or then you're at your lover's window. In chapter four of first John, John brings us back to the third of those three tests, the test of belief. And when he states the theme this time, it's epic.

Now that's not the kind of soundtrack we'd expect when we talk about doctrine, right? At best, doctrine is dry stuff. But at its worst, doctrine, theology, those are words that many of us are suspicious of.

Doctrine is just a power play. Something used by those in power to stay in power. Or it's something to divide over or argue over. Or it distracts from what's really important, like loving each other and serving the needy. Or doctrine can be exclusive. And you have to keep in mind that what I just described there is truth without love. Now John in this letter is like hammering love. You must love your brothers and sisters. Those who know God, those who know the Father, love their brothers and sisters. So we're not talking about that. But what John is saying is that love is not indiscriminate, and belief is not indiscriminate. Truth is important. As a matter of fact, it's of cosmic importance.

[3 : 0 1] So we'll make two observations about this passage. First, that there are spiritual realities behind truth and error. And the second is that at the center of truth lies Jesus. Let's pray.

God, open our hearts to your word. Open your word to our hearts.

That we may believe and understand and worship you. Lead us on by the light of your word, please. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Okay, so as we look at this passage and see what John has to say about truth, the first thing that jumps out at us is that there is a whole world of spiritual forces at play. Now this is not news to John's readers that such forces would exist. You see, many of John's readers had come from the occult.

And the apostle Paul had previously written to this very church. And in that letter, Paul writes, for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

And as we heard throughout all the scripture that was read tonight, this battle of good and evil, this battle that takes place in the spiritual realms, it's all throughout scripture. And Jesus faced it himself. And John would have been at Jesus' side as he confronted demons and the forces of evil.

[4 : 44] Now in this particular church, there were so many ideas and claims swirling around. And there were many teachers that had come to them as prophets and oracles. And some perhaps probably performed like supernatural acts. So John is giving his readers the permission to be a bit agnostic.

Don't believe every spirit, he writes. Test the spirits. There have been false prophets. Now in the previous chapter, which we heard last week, and as Tommy preached, John had already laid out that you could divide up everyone into two families. Those who love each other and keep God's commandments are in God's family, and those who don't aren't. And here John is being very binary again. Every prophet is a mouthpiece or spokesman of some spirit. Behind every prophet is a spirit, and behind every spirit is God or the devil. Now John doesn't write this way to frighten his readers, but rather to encourage them. Do you remember the passage, the first one we read from 2 Kings?

The context was one of continual skirmishing, sometimes outright warfare between Israel, which was the northern half of the people of God, and the nation of Syria, which is the country that lay just north of Israel.

The Syrian king discovered that all his plans and deliberations were being revealed to the king of Israel, because Elisha, the prophet in Israel, is being granted secret knowledge of them. So the king of Syria sends his army to track down Elisha and take him captive.

The next day, Elisha's servant discovers that there, all around the city, are armies. There's an army with horses and chariots. So he runs back to Elisha in a panic.

[6 : 43] What are we going to do? And Elisha's answer is brilliant and memorable. He says, don't be afraid. There are more with us than there are with them. Well, what does he mean?

And Elisha prays that God would open the young man's eyes. He does so, and the servant sees the reality. The veil has been lifted, and the mountain is full of horses and chariots of fire, all around Elisha. And John says something very similar to his readers in chapter 4. You are from God and have overcome them, for he who is greater, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

What can we take away from all of this, from knowing about the spiritual forces at play behind truth and error? Well, first, it keeps us both humble and confident. If we know God, it's because God is in us. We are united to Christ. If we know anything about him, it's not because of our superior intellect or some superior goodness. It's only because God has revealed himself to us and has revealed these things to us. As a matter of fact, Paul writes that we know these things because God has chosen them, chosen to reveal them to the weak and the foolish and the despised. So this keeps us humble. But it keeps us confident because despite our constant doubting and faltering, our fear and our wandering, God has kept us for himself. Second, we must realize that there are spiritual forces at play when it comes to our beliefs and doubts. Now, faith is much more than an ascent to intellectual proposition.

Faith comes from having been made alive by God's Spirit, and understanding comes from being illuminated by God's Spirit. So when you doubt, the solution is probably not to acquire more and more information.

Spiritual practices must be considered. Are you regularly worshiping with God's people? Is there any sin you've remained unrepentant of? Are you in a regular rhythm of prayer and study?

[9 : 05] Do you regularly seek silence so as to hush the noises raging around you so that you're open to hearing the Spirit of God? Now, if right there you're feeling guilty because you fail at a lot of those things, don't? The Father still loves you and is drawing himself to you. And I struggle with these things too.

It is Washington, D.C., after all. But the best help I've received on this, this thing about, like, finding silence and listening to God is a wonderfully creative work by the Irish Jesuits.

They've produced a website and a book called Sacred Space, and you can access it at a website, sacredspace.ie. Basically, they present a way of doing an ancient practice called Lectio Divina.

It's a disciplined entry into listening, fruitful silence. I highly recommend it as a way to disengage from the mental and emotional noise raging in your heart and mind in order to hear more clearly the Spirit speaking through the Word.

So a third thing we take away from understanding the spiritual forces at play behind truth and error is to remain vigilant. From cover to cover of the Bible, God warns his people against false beliefs.

[10 : 26] If you have a Bible or smartphone, turn to Deuteronomy 13. And if you don't own a Bible, would you tell me or one of us in leadership and we'll get you a Bible.

And if English isn't your native language, we'll track down one that's in your mother tongue. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, chapter 13, verse 1.

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, let us go after other gods which you have not known, let us serve them, you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams.

For the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. So from the beginning of Scripture, God is warning his people, be vigilant, look out for false prophets.

They are everywhere and they're throughout all time. Throughout the Old Testament, God's prophets are at constant odds with false prophets. In the Gospels, Jesus warns us many times about false prophets.

[11 : 44] John here warns us. Peter in his second letter warns us. You can't really throw a rock into the writings of Paul without hitting something about false teachers. So if it's so pervasive throughout the Bible, we must assume it to be true in our day as well.

Why is this so pervasive? John is showing us the truth that lies behind the veil. There are certain teachings that aren't just wrong, they're evil.

They're evil and they're pervasive because they are lies perpetrated by the biggest liar who's been lying from the beginning, the devil. The devil hates the church.

He hates you. And the way to strike at your heart, and the way to strike at the heart of the church, the way to decimate her is to obfuscate the truth about who Jesus is.

And this truth we must guard vigilantly. And this brings us to our second observation about this passage. That it's all about Jesus.

[12 : 50] At the center of truth lies the person of Jesus Christ. So what are these false prophets teaching in 1 John 4? So if you look at verse 2, it says, By this you know the Spirit of God.

Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. I've read numerous commentaries, and they all agree that this key construction is this phrase, has come in the flesh.

We need to pay attention to this to see what's going on. In essence, it's a test formula. This confession is that the man Jesus himself is none other than the incarnate Son of God, which is the doctrine that the Gnostics denied.

Gnosticism was a new pagan Hellenistic religion that often sounded a lot like Christianity. But in reality, it was antithetical to the teachings of Jesus. And it had drawn a lot of people away from this church.

Many had left the church John was writing to because of it. One of the chief proponents of early Gnosticism was a man named Serenthus. And he taught that the divine Christ came upon the man Jesus at his baptism and left him before the cross.

[14 : 17] Because in Hellenistic and Greek religions, the divine must never suffer. But the central doctrine of Christ, as both divine and human, can never be compromised.

Earlier in this letter, John stressed the importance of confessing Christ. Now if we compare that passage from chapter 2 with this one, we'll find something very helpful.

We should observe the difference. In chapter 2, our confession or denial of the Son determines or signals whether we possess the Father or not.

In chapter 4, our confession or denial of the Son indicates whether we are inspired by the Spirit or not. The person of Christ is central. No system can be tolerated, however loud its claims or clever its followers, which denies that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh.

It must affirm his eternal deity and his historical humanity. Those who deny the Son have neither the Father nor the Spirit. That's why it's so important.

[15 : 28] Not only is John telling us what is true about a person, a person he knew personally, he's also talking about an event. The gospel is news about an event.

The gospel isn't a list of platitudes that determines truth versus error. The gospel is news that Jesus, who claimed to be the Christ, the Son of God, came in the flesh.

And how do we know that Jesus' claims about himself are true? Well, he vindicated those claims by rising from the dead. Now, heresy cuts the heart out of the gospel.

Through the gospel, we understand our need to be rescued. Because Christ is fully man, he can be our mediator. And he can represent us. And he takes on himself the punishment that we deserve.

And he bestows on us his perfect record of righteousness and obedience. And he gives us his sonship with the Father. So now we are the sons and daughters of the Father.

[16 : 36] And Jesus is our brother. Now, if Christ had not assumed a genuine human nature with a genuine human body, then he couldn't represent us. Man would have had no true mediator.

No atonement would have been made for us and we would still be in our sins. For this reason, John says that the denial of Christ's having come in the flesh is the spirit of Antichrist.

So how can we help ourselves remain clear about who Jesus is? How can we keep him the hub from which radiates and around which revolves our theology, our morals, our ethics, our worldview, so to speak?

How can we have confidence that we know God by listening to the apostles? That's in verse 6. Look at there.

Verse 6 is about the apostles. It says, We, the apostles, are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us. Whoever is not from God does not listen to us.

[17 : 40] By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. We listen to the apostles whenever we read the New Testament in its entirety, not just sticking with the words of Jesus and ignoring everything else.

We listen to the apostles whenever we hear the Bible being preached faithfully. We listen to the apostles whenever we confess together the creed. And in a moment, we'll do that together.

We've talked a lot about listening. Listening to the apostles, hearing the spirit, discerning truth. Is there something that can help us better understand that activity?

What helps me understand that activity is on the cover of your bulletin. It's a sketch. It's an engraving by Rembrandt. You can look at it now.

This isn't any particular scene from the Bible. This is a general scene of Christ preaching.

[18 : 51] The first thing to observe is a profound silence. You can see the bodies. They're somewhat hunched over because they've been there a while.

Listening intently. And the only thing that you can really hear is the voice of Jesus. Or perhaps from time to time, the sound of the little boy in front who's tracing in the sand.

The only person in the scene who is hearing but not listening. If you look at the left, you'll see a man in a beret.

There's two things occurring occurring simultaneously at this moment. The first is the man on the left. He's kind of leaning in and he's got his hand in front of him and his thumb like right on his chin.

He's the one wearing like the thing looks like a beret, right? It's as if he's like pondering every word that's being said, thinking, chewing on it. The other thing that's happening is on the right.

[19 : 59] There's an old man and he's like leaning in. He doesn't want to miss a single word that's being spoken by the master.

Now you heard me say that the little boy in the front is the only one who's hearing and not listening. Even Jesus is listening. That's why Rembrandt has Jesus' hands the way they are to accent the angle of the head of Jesus.

What is he doing? He's listening to his father. He communicates only what he's received from the father. And this sketch accomplishes what one art historian says could never be done.

Rembrandt accomplished the impossible. He sketched the portrait of a voice. The portrait of a voice in the midst of profound silence.

God speaks. And that voice we lean into as God's people desiring to hear every word not missing one.

[21 : 19] It's the voice of the spirit that tells us Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. And in just a few minutes we'll eat of his flesh and drink of his blood and celebrate Christ's victory over his enemies and be reminded that we are the father's little children.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.