

Testing the Spirits

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- [0 : 0 0] Almighty God, as we come to your word, we are reminded that it is powerful to make us wise to salvation in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, that its purpose is to teach us, correct us, rebuke us and train us in righteousness.
- So we pray, Lord God, that you will give us submissive hearts before your word, that we may indeed believe it and receive it with joy and obedience for Jesus' sake. Amen.
- Amen. Sometimes if you climb a spiral staircase in, for example, an old building, you get little windows and you begin to see just little glimpses as you're climbing up the spiral staircase of the view.
- I remember years ago climbing to the top of Big Ben. It was a bit like that. A bit of view here and a little bit of view there and then, of course, a great big vista at the top. And in some ways, reading through 1 John is a bit like a spiral staircase because every little while you get a glimpse in that direction and then you move on to the next direction, but you come around to the same direction as before, but from a slightly different angle, so to speak.
- And what we find in 1 John is this recurrence of themes, themes of love and themes of obedience, themes of truth and believing that Jesus is real or came really in the flesh and so on.
- [1 : 3 2] And so we find ourselves not repeating or not finding repetition so much as the same things come back to the fore, slightly different perspectives, different angles on those themes.
- So much so that a number of commentaries actually don't go through the book sort of verse by verse, but gather the themes together. So you deal with all the bits about love together and all the bits about holiness, which I find a bit dissatisfying, a little bit too synthesizing sometimes and lacks a little bit of the flow of the letter.
- Having said that, there are themes that we'll come back to tonight that we've seen glimpses of in the last either Wednesdays or Sundays. I must confess I lose track of which bit was when in a sense.
- But the common thread, I think, through the whole of the epistle, with all these different perspectives, is the thread of assurance. John is writing to assure his readers that they are Christians in a relationship with God, secure, and so on.
- So we've got to keep that in mind as the dominant theme in the letter. Now, yes, it's true he wrote the letter so that they may not sin. So there's that theme of holiness. But throughout, there's this undergirding theme of assurance.
- [2 : 5 3] John, at the end of the previous passage, it's actually what I preached on on Sunday night, finishing in verse 18 of chapter 3, said, Little children, let us love, not in word and speech or speech, but in truth and action.
- That is love that is real, substantial, evident, objective, clear, not idle, full of words and thoughts, but actually in practice as a demonstration, in particular of generosity to those in need, as the previous verses say, a demonstration of giving up your life for the sake of others following the example of Jesus Christ.

That exhortation leads into the theme of assurance again. It's a very fine balance in 1 John. It's an astonishing balance in a way.

That a letter that is so black and white about how Christians ought to behave, yet has such clear assurance for the Christian's relationship with God. That is, you'd expect in some ways, where a letter has the high demands of holiness and love, that it would be in some ways lacking assurance, because the bar is so high.

And yet in this letter we find a very high bar, but a very high cushion of assurance, if I can put it like that. So we move into an opening section of tonight's passage, at least, with assurance.

[4 : 25] See how verse 19 begins. And by this we will know, will be assured, confident, certain, that we are from the truth. Now, these verses 19 and 20 are tricky verses, actually, in a way, to be quite sure about what John is driving at, in part because of a couple of words that could be translated in slightly different ways and so on.

By this, that is, the words by this at the beginning of verse 19, probably refer back to loving in truth and action. That is, by your loving in action, by the demonstration of your love, by your practical good works and generosity, we will know that we are from the truth.

That is, love in action demonstrates, is evidence for being in the truth, being in a relationship with God, being a Christian and so on.

Not that it's the cause of becoming a Christian, it's not salvation by works, by any stretch of the imagination, but it's the evidence of being in a relationship with God.

That, as we saw last week, I think, at the beginning of chapter 3, is from the grace of God who enables us to be called his children, his love. Behold what manner of love at the beginning of chapter 3.

[5 : 49] And then going back to chapter 1, those ringing notes of mercy, where our sins are cleansed. So it's mercy that brings the relationship, but good works, love, in particular here in truth and action, is the evidence, the concrete evidence, that leads to assurance that someone is in a right relationship with God.

It's hard to know how much, in a sense, to weigh the balance. The reformers, Martin Luther, for example, and in particular, had a very strong note of we are justified by grace.

Our assurance is on God's declaration that our sins are forgiven. And that's the basis of his assurance. The Puritans, who came, in a sense, later in the 16th century into the 17th century, and were long forgotten by many Christians until this last century, halfway through that, I suppose, had a much, didn't deny the assurance that comes from being justified and knowing that on the final judgment day our sins will be forgiven.

That is sure. But on the same token, the Puritans had a very strong weight placed on the evidence of good works, changed behavior and character that would strengthen the assurance of an eternal destiny.

Not that they said, your good works cause you to be a Christian. Not at all. But that we ought to expect good works. We ought to expect love in action. We ought to expect obedience to the commandments.

[7 : 26] We ought to expect adherence to the truth and so on as evidence of a relationship established by God's grace. And I suspect here in 1 John, we actually get that emphasis from which the Puritan emphasis derives in a way.

And I think we ought not to shy away from that. I suspect the Protestants, because we want to sort of distance ourselves from any thought of a more Catholic view that somehow our good works cause us to be saved or contribute to our salvation.

What we've probably swung too far away from is the evidential value and weight for assurance of good works and love and obedience.

So here in 1 John, I think we find that. We ought not to undermine it or dismiss it. For those of us who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, it ought to be that we can see our love in truth and action, our obedience to God's command, the change in our character, and that ought to give us added assurance, if we can add assurance, for our eternal destiny, our relationship with God, and so on.

John Newton, the writer of Amazing Grace, put it in this way, words that are relatively well known, I think. I'm not what I ought to be. I'm not what I wish to be.

[8 : 55] I'm not what I hope to be. And 1 John would undergird all of those things. He would say, yes, you're not those. You need to confess your sins. Your sins are still being cleansed and purified and so on.

Yet, I may not be what I ought to be, what I wish to be, or what I hope to be, yet I can truly say, I am not what I once was. By the grace of God, what I am what I am.

John Newton is acknowledging there that though he's not yet perfected, he's changed. God has worked within him. By God's grace, he is what he is.

It's a powerful grace that not only justifies us, forgives us our sins, but the same grace changes us within. Titus 2 makes that connection very clear.

And I think John is on the same lines with different language in a way. So that we ought to be able to look back in our Christian life and see, I've changed.

[9 : 56] I have love in truth and action. I am obedient to commands. I'm not perfect. There are still sins which I need to confess, repent of, and find cleansing and purification for.

But nonetheless, the change within me, maybe painfully slow, is evidence that gives me assurance that I'm a child of God.

That is what John is saying here, but throughout his letter indeed as well. So what he's saying then in these opening couple of verses, it seems to me, let me just read again verse 19 and 20.

By this, by our love in truth and action, we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us.

For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything. Now the really tricky bit is to work out what's the thrust of saying God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.

[10 : 57] Is that to scare us to say God knows absolutely more than you do about your heart and how far short you fall? Or is it a statement of comfort that somehow God is bigger and different from our own hearts which in this context of verse 20 condemn us?

In contrast to the end of verse 19 and reassure our hearts. Now the word for reassure is literally the word persuade or convince. So what's John trying to say here?

He is saying look at your actions and be reassured. He's writing to Christians who've held fast and he is assuring them time and again in this letter as we've seen that they are children of God.

So he's saying in a sense look at your actions and be reassured. Examine yourselves and you can see objectively your love in truth and action and thus be assured.

But of course self-examination can also be troubling. As I examine myself I yes on the one hand I can see I think I hope love in truth and action I know I can.

[12 : 08] But on the other hand I can also see glaring failures and big moral gaps. And so a self-examination may not actually make us comfortable.

For many people a self-examination makes us uncertain. not assured. Our hearts condemn us. And so what John I think is saying in verse 20 is that we are to heed God's voice above our own heart's voice.

God's bigger than our heart. It's his voice that matters more than our hearts. You see in many ways as we look at our own hearts for many of us we see the faults before we see the fruit and the good works.

And we may find ourselves or our hearts condemning us. And John's saying examine yourselves but be careful as you do so.

Yes be honest about sin. He's not denying that. He's not washing over that in any way. But he says your heart may not forgive you your mistakes. You know I was thinking I don't know why I was but I was thinking of something I did the other day when I was about eight or nine I was thinking what a stupid thing I did then.

[13 : 25] Now in some ways you think oh gosh am I forgiven that? That is it's very easy to be self-condemnatory about all sorts of things that we may have actually confessed to God and yet they're still there in our memory.

They don't disappear from our memory. And sometimes people find that sort of guilt plaguing even demoralizing causing uncertainty and even doubts in their faith.

How can God forgive me for that? And in effect what's being said here I think is along the lines it's different language but along the lines of the language you hear today about well it's all very well for God to forgive me but I've got to forgive myself.

I tell people no God's got to forgive you. That's what matters God forgiving you. If you've asked God to forgive you that's all that matters for eternity.

the guilt's gone if he's forgiven you. There's nothing about forgiving yourself. In some ways this is hinting towards it with a heart that might condemn yourself.

[14 : 30] It's a slightly different language. John I think you see is trying to reassure his believers that they are in a relationship with God so that as they examine themselves they do so honestly.

They see their sins which lead to confession chapter 1 they see their fruit and good works that leads to assurance but they listen to God's voice above their heart's voice and God's voice says you're forgiven.

There's mercy. The blood of Jesus cleanses you from your sin. Again going back to the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2 in this letter. So I think that's what the thrust of these verses are.

It is the future tense which may be relatively striking. By this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him. And the context of before him with the future tense probably is thinking of judgment day when we're before the throne of God.

If you look back to where is it forward rather to chapter 4 verse 17 love has been perfected among us in this that we may have boldness on the day of judgment.

[15 : 42] judgment and the theme of judgment is alluded to in a few other places in this letter. I think this is one of them. It's looking forward to that day of judgment and being acquitted on that day and hearing God's voice on that day rather than our hearts self-condemnation on that day.

What a wonderful thing that God knows our hearts is greater than even our own understanding of ourselves and yet his voice will be acquitted on that final day.

In some ways you see this omniscience or total knowledge of God of even our hearts is a bit like Psalm 139 which God knows everything. I can't flee from him but that's a wonderfully comforting thing not a threatening thing.

I think that's the same sort of thrust in these verses as well. As I said the word for reassured at the end of 19 is literally persuade and convince.

And one of the tricky things is that it's never got the meaning of reassure. It only ever really has a meaning of persuade and convince. In some ways from what I've read and understand maybe we're better to say that to persuade and convince.

[16 : 57] That is our hearts may say you're guilty you're a sinner. We in some ways have to persuade or convince our hearts that we're acquitted that the blood of Jesus has cleansed us.

I don't mean that we're sort of battling within ourselves saying sinner no forgiven sinner forgiven sort of thing tussling with our heart. But there's a sense in which we do need to convince ourselves of the truth of God's word that God's word matters more than a guilty heart in some way.

Some interpreters you see following this persuade convince take it slightly differently that these two verses are not about reassurance but actually challenge and they're challenging people who are not loving in truth and action lacking generosity whose hearts are stingy that they need persuading to be more generous.

I'm not quite sure that the thrust of one John and the style of these two verses quite fits that myself. But I'm trying to give you the other possibility there on the strength of the word persuade convince.

I think the issue is we need to persuade and convince hearts which of course are deceitful and so on of the truth of God's declaration that in mercy we're forgiven our hearts have been cleansed and forgiven.

[18 : 16] Now I realize that's a slightly technical sort of argument but I'm trying to grapple with it and unpack it a bit for you for those couple of verses. we need to know our hearts need to know that God acquits us.

That's where the reassurance comes in the way it's translated in verse 19. In some ways if there's a challenge here John is saying if you're not sure go out and love people in truth and action.

That's what to do. That is persuade your heart to love in truth and action. If that sense of challenge does exist in these verses though as I say I think the thrust is more to do with reassurance.

And as I've said if you remember verses in the Old Testament for example our hearts are fickle they are deceitful they don't necessarily guide us rightly although so many people just follow their heart thus endeth marriages thus endeth Christian life and so on.

Our hearts need the truth to infiltrate them. We need to remind ourselves of what is true sometimes. Sometimes we are forgiven by God for our sins but we remember those sins and we feel guilty.

[19 : 30] If we've confessed them the guilt in one sense is gone. And yet of course Satan is the accuser who wants us to feel guilty. He wants us to be vulnerable on the issue of assurance of sins forgiven.

It's one of his chief weapons to undermine the doctrine of justification by faith. God is the heart. So the heart can be deceived fairly quickly into thinking I'm still guilty.

My sins are not forgiven. The heart can be deceived into thinking I don't I'm not on a right standing with God here. I'm not good enough. So that's what I think is behind this verse to persuade and convince our hearts that our sins are forgiven by God who knows us better than we do.

Who can see that our weak and fitful obedience may actually stem from true allegiance but is poorly expressed but is acceptable nonetheless.

Of course these verses remind us and therefore comfort us that it's common if not normal for Christians to feel guilty about things they ought not to feel.

[20 : 37] Not in the sense of doing something bad and I shouldn't feel guilty but when our sins are forgiven we ought not to carry that burden of guilt around. The scriptures keep reminding us of that of course in Hebrews for example and elsewhere.

When our sins are forgiven they're forgiven once and for all by God and we've got to persuade our heart that that is the truth of the matter. So the sense of reassure does fit although the word persuade or convince is probably a bit better and as verse 20 then goes on whenever our hearts condemn us we reassure our hearts convince ourselves that God's truth of acquittal is right for God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything and it's his word that matters most.

Now why is this little issue so important? Not the issue so much of the grammar and the words but why is John spending this couple of verses on this matter again?

It's because as we've seen already in 1 John in a couple of places when we are self condemning when we are lacking assurance of sins forgiven when we have a weak doctrine of justification by faith we are vulnerable to heresy and indeed to immorality.

Remember that passage in 2 Timothy 3 about the silly women not that it's in one sense just something that's peculiar to women who carrying burdens of guilt are overwhelmed by their guilt and they run after the false teachers and so too for those who have not worked out that their sins are forgiven through the grace of Jesus Christ it's a very important issue it's fundamental in the Christian life theologically it's called the doctrine of justification by faith although it's a bit broader than that in the way John's issuing it here that is completely undeserved of us our sins are forgiven by the blood or death of Jesus an act of God's grace and love and mercy for us which we don't deserve it occurs for us of God's choosing while we're even enemies and certainly while we are weak the doctrine of justification by faith lies at the very heart of the Christian gospel a very heart of Christian life very heart of church life for those who are Holy Trinity members and we're here at our annual meeting in November my annual meeting address was on this very doctrine not because I want to bombard us with theology so much as because I think our lives as a church and individuals need to be anchored in the most important doctrine there is and because I know that if we're not certain on this issue then we are very vulnerable to go elsewhere because if we don't understand appreciate that we're justified by faith then we'll keep thinking there must be more somewhere so we'll search for some deeper higher experience or teaching that will offer us more than what we think we've been given but there is nothing more the doctrine of justification by faith is as good as it could be there is nothing better there's no better gospel than that and so that's why it's so important it seems to me and whenever I meet people who are going after other better higher experiences or heresies or into other sects really at the heart of it is their failure to appreciate this central doctrine so that's why I think

[24 : 12] John labours on it his readers were being bombarded by false teachers who'd been part of their Christian fellowship had gone out from it as we saw back in chapter two I think it was are now trying to entice people out of it away from what they've heard from John probably claiming that they are inspired or anointed by the spirit for their teaching that they've got a new or a better teaching that is different from what John had that's probably got some sort of Greek philosophical influence about it probably has a lower morality associated with it it sounds very tempting and if you don't have a robust view of the gospel of justification by faith in Jesus Christ then you'll be very prone and willing to run after that false teaching and the same happens today so that's why it's so important that's why I'm laboring the fact tonight to make sure that we're right on that doctrine and issue another practical implication of being self condemned in a sense is that we don't pray not that we've got to feel that we're perfectly righteous in and of ourselves but if our hearts condemn us then we won't pray much we won't pray sincerely our prayers will be faulty flawed infrequent that is because we'll feel with this heart condemning ourselves how can

I approach a holy God the relationship is fractured or broken in some way see what John says in the next verse 21 beloved if our hearts do not condemn us we have boldness before God boldness not only on the judgment day I think to stand in God's presence with sins forgiven but boldness now as the context of the next verse shows to pray to God so getting this doctrine of justification right is crucial if our prayer life is to be right is the connection and so John goes on in verse 22 to say and we receive from him God whatever we ask because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him now that's an astonishing claim to make we receive whatever we ask is this an invitation to pray whatever we want pray that the weeding gets done in my garden for example or the car gets washed somehow miraculously

I mean after all if we've got enough faith to move mountains and to pray for mountains to be removed surely a few weeds is not too hard for God and not too bad for me to ask isn't this what John is saying here pray whatever you want whatever you ask well there are similar statements made even by Jesus in the night before he died in John 14 to 16 for example along this lines but we've got to keep everything in context too of course John I think is maybe being a little bit hyperbolic here but we've got to balance it with what he says in chapter 5 verse 14 for example where he fills it out in a little bit more balance and detail this is the boldness we have in him that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us now we might say oh yes but in this verse John's not not restricting it in that way he's saying whatever you ask but actually

I think the verse makes the same restriction but in different language you see the second half of verse 22 does the same sort of balancing act with the first half yes the first half says and we receive from him whatever we ask but notice in a sense the condition applied to the person the believer who's praying that is at the end of verse 22 because we obey his commandment and do what pleases him so if I'm doing what pleases God then my prayers will be requesting what pleases God and he will answer them and if I'm obeying his commandments then my prayers will be in the context of obedience to his commandments and they'll be answered by him that's the context same context indeed exactly the same the link of answered prayer to obedience that Jesus makes in John 14 and John 16 as well now the purpose of verse 22 is both to encourage people as well as in one sense to challenge them it's to encourage them to be more obedient so that their prayers will be answered but also it's building on the argument of not having condemning hearts so it's saying get your act together with your heart with your doctrine of justification by faith and that will influence your prayer life be encouraged it's not just at the end of your life standing before

God but even now you'll have boldness and confidence to pray knowing that God will answer your prayers so get your act together now in the balance of things John is more reassuring than challenging but both go together he's not wanting to undermine any assurance that his readers might have and the issue you see is confidence having confidence not because of our obedience or because we do what pleases him confidence from our heart because we're right with God by his grace and mercy which has found evidence in obedience and pleasing God keeping the horse before the cart and not putting it the other way around so confidence is found through getting that doctrine of justification by faith right so that our hearts don't self-condemn us very different from TV isn't it where confidence comes from the right sort of toothpaste or confidence comes from lots of practice the sports coaches will tell you that or the piano teachers or confidence comes from whistling a happy tune confidence comes from a psychotherapist or a hypnotherapist or whatever confidence comes from a theological matter getting our doctrine of justification by faith right that brings confidence which is expressed in prayers which results in answers to prayer and so on theological solutions not psychological ones we keep finding in the scriptures john reiterates now the heart of the commandment he's already done that in chapter 3 verse 11 and there he said this is the message you've heard from the beginning that we should love one another and if that's all he said we could well be excused by those who you know well think that those are right who say well I'm a loving person therefore I'm a Christian but of course it's not the end of the matter in john john often in this letter will say one thing but elsewhere in the letter it gets balanced somewhere else that is you've got to take the whole letter together just like

[31 : 18] I made that comment about prayer so too with love it's not just simply the more loving you are the more Christian you are and here we find the balance this is his commandment that we should believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ and love one another that is there's a theological component and a moral or ethical component to the commandment of God that is it's not just being a loving person there are lots of loving people out there they're not Christians well many of them aren't that is love one another and believe in the name of Jesus Christ so right belief and right practice go together or as to use a technical word orthodoxy that is being orthodox in belief and orthopraxy being orthodox in your practice your moral ethical practice the content of belief is important it's not just that you believe something here it's summarized for us as believing in the name of his son Jesus Christ which is not just believing that something is true but trusting in the name of the Lord

Jesus Christ and within that little expression pregnant of meaning it's got the idea of the powerful authoritative name of Jesus Christ for salvation as the long awaited Messiah son of God etc that is at the heart of the gospel of who Jesus is why he came and what he did now one of the things we've seen in John is that he having finished a theme he doesn't sort of say well that's that matter let's move to another one he sort of transitions he sort of repeats himself but adds a new idea as he repeats so the last verse of chapter three all who obey his commandments abide in him and he abides in them which picks up some ideas of earlier in the letter but now he adds a new idea and by this we know that he abides in us by the spirit that he has given us there's encouragement to obey the beginning of the verse all who obey his commandments abide in him there is the promise of resultant intimacy abiding in him and he abides in us same sort of language that Jesus uses for example again in those significant chapters

John 14 to 16 that's tied to obedience by Jesus John's clearly dependent on Jesus upper room teaching the night before he died but now the additional theme is the mention of the Holy Spirit at the very end of chapter of verse 24 and by this we know that he abides in us by the spirit now the theme of assurance keeps cropping up here is an additional reason for assurance for a Christian by this we know that he abides in us well already we've seen things like love in truth and action obedience right belief etc here's an additional aspect or evidence for assurance that is the Holy Spirit given us or given to us that's the means by which God abides in us so now the first time the Holy Spirit is mentioned in this letter he's actually mentioned several times in the final two chapters in one sense a new assurance the role of the

Holy Spirit here is significantly to do with assurance one of its major roles in the New Testament but in my reading one of the most under emphasized roles of the Holy Spirit in modern day teaching on the Holy Spirit or emphases on the Holy Spirit it's a bit like the deposit guarantee idea in that Ephesians chapter 1 passage verses 13 14 of Ephesians chapter 1 Now how that is the case is not spelled out by John Paul for example in Romans 8 talks about the Spirit within us enabling us to call God our Father which has got the same idea of assurance but John doesn't go down that path necessarily he keeps it a bit open or in Romans 5 Paul talks about the Holy Spirit being given into us and God's love poured into us etc so given the theme of love maybe that's behind what

John is saying that the Holy Spirit in us evidence of God abiding in us and the fruit of that is us loving like God loved maybe in the background we're just not told for sure but the theme of the Holy Spirit or the Spirit given to us at the end of chapter 3 leads into a discussion about testing the spirits in the first six verses of chapter 4 which we'll finish with tonight and so therefore given what follows the spirit in us as evidence is probably tied more to the idea of truth rather than let's say love or calling God Father those aspects of Paul in Romans now often the doctrine of the spirit is taught in a way that in some senses is hard to distinguish from subjectivism that is the Holy Spirit told me to do this or said this to me or whatever

[36 : 34] John is very clear of that sort of subjective idea of the spirit very often well not very often often people say to me things like the Holy Spirit told me that I should do this or that I mean at the very worst the Holy Spirit told somebody to leave their wife and go for someone else well the Holy Spirit never does that that that's what I mean by the subjective nature of being led by the spirit sometimes in modern teaching we don't get out of that subjectiveness there's none of that here in these verses of the spirit within here in 1 John he begins chapter 4 by giving two commands a positive and negative do not believe every spirit positively test the spirits to see whether they are from God for many false prophets have gone out into the world notice the link of false prophets and spirits or perhaps teaching and spirits going together that is you've got a false prophet therefore there is a wrong spirit associated with that not not meaning that in a sense they're spirit possessed

I don't mean that but just the false spirits or testing the spirits means that you test what people say test their words in effect if they're prophets probably of course the context of course is that there are false teachers who've gone out from John's own congregation or his readers congregation at least and he's trying to help people see the bigger picture and to stand firm in the midst of that threat notice how at the end of verse one for example these many false prophets have gone out into the world now we push that to its limit that means that they started within the church and they've now gone out from the Christian church as false prophets teaching untruths and trying to cause people to follow that untruth what John is referring to here is exactly what Jesus warned would happen Mark 13 etc in his words towards the end of his life of the last days so how do you test how do you test the spirits to see if they're from

God well one test that people sometimes use is well if what they say actually occurs if they predict something that actually happens well surely they must be from God that's where people get a bit of hung up or confused or led astray by you know the Nostradamus type things or even horoscopes and so on in our local paper on the front page last week it was all about a clairvoyance saying what was going to happen this year I couldn't be bothered reading it I wrote a letter to the editor to object hope you did the same or is it just your experience of something that is I've experienced it therefore it must be right and true I was on my way back from a funeral at Springvale yesterday and after the 12 o'clock news I think it was they had some interview which eventually worked out it was Helen Reddy the singer from 30 years ago or something feminist singer who's all into spiritual types of things because of a so-called I suppose out of body type experience she once had when she was a school child and therefore this must be true this has given me conviction about eternal life well is that how we test the spirit for some it's warm feelings or some particular emotional feeling I felt really good when it happened it must be from

God it must be right and true or is it miracles and healings that's certainly the claim of a number of teachers or prophets or evangelists here is a person anointed by the spirit and you can see that they're anointed from God and his spirit because of the miracles and the healings that they attest to I remember seeing the advertising for Reinhard Bonke when he was on his way to Nigeria soon after I was in Nigeria a few years ago it was all full of that sort of stuff I remember what 10 11 12 years ago the Toronto blessing at the vineyard church at Toronto airport and the great wave that had in England where I was then living and people debating is this of God or not oh it must be of God it's real people feel warm they really fall over they don't want to fall over but they do how do you test the spirits well the test is simple John says it's nothing to do about experience it's nothing to do about warm feelings falling over it's nothing to do with miracles or healings or predictions either the simple test in verse 2 is 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 very simple now remember in John's particular context that the key issue about

Jesus that was being denied by the wrong teachers was the incarnation that Jesus was not perfectly human and perfectly divine at the one and the same time totally integrated in his body having been born in Bethlehem that's why John began the epistle the way he did about the reality of touching hearing and seeing Jesus they thought like many Greeks thought that somehow a divine spirit had had perhaps sort of entered a human body but it's not integrated it's a human fallen body and there's a divine spirit in it it's not incarnation and of course there are many people even today who'd say that same divine spirit has entered Buddha or the Dalai Lama or some guru over here and the divine Christ spirit has gone around and Jesus was one of Muhammad or whatever they're all one and the same some people say that's not the incarnation and that's the sort of thing that was being denied so the test here is probably deliberately framed for the wrong teaching that is it may not be in one sense a total sufficient test for every situation that's that's actually why we've ended up with the

[42 : 13] Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed for example and the Athanasian Creed if you can ever get your mouth around it that is they're they're actually framed in those first five or six centuries after Jesus to refute wrong teaching about the nature of Jesus Christ and the Trinity fundamentally isn't it interesting that in those creeds there's virtually nothing about atonement it wasn't contested but if we were devising creeds in the 16th century like Westminster Confessions and so on a bit later then there's much more emphasis about things like atonement because they were refuting wrong teaching then in some ways I think it's a good thing to say the creed on a Sunday like we do here but sometimes I think it's not necessarily itching at the errors that are confronting the church today either it's not a complete statement either so bear that in mind but the key here is that it's a doctrinal test that's how you know if something is of God or not does it deny or confess that Jesus Christ is Lord come in the flesh the incarnation atonement etc the heart of the gospel doctrinal test that's the crucial thing and yes of course there may be people who predict things and they come true there may well be counterfeit prophets who heal people miraculously

I think Christians are barking up the wrong tree if we try and refute every healing that's claimed by a false teacher they may actually some of them be true some of them may well be counterfeit and fake I don't think it matters in one sense apart from the fact that people get deceived by it the test is a doctrinal test there may well be many very well be people who get great warm feelings they may be personally stirred up or even changed by some spiritual experience guru teacher false teacher prophet whatever but it's a doctrinal test that matters and John's not saying anything new here either in fact you go all the way back to Moses my favorite book Deuteronomy chapter 13 he acknowledges that there'll be false teachers who come around and they'll actually perform miracles that people will follow and think well this person must be right I mean if it's a miracle after all it must be God's power behind it not at all and Moses says yes see whether what they say comes true if it doesn't come true they're a false prophet but even if it comes true or if they perform a miracle are they leading people after false gods that's the test in the end just the same sort of doctrinal test that we find here we've got to remember that behind false teaching is the antichrist false spirits it's not just flesh and blood to against which we contend there is evil power at work in such things

John made that clear in chapter 2 verse 18 onwards that was a Sunday night sermon a couple of weeks ago but the same sort of thing comes in these verses here chapter 4 verses 1 to 6 so we ought not be bamboozled or confused by all sorts of magic predictions great acts healings etc they are often diabolical means to deceive people and lead them away from the truth about Jesus Christ John has stated the test positively in verse 2 negatively in verse 3 as he often does in this letter stating one thing once and then putting it in its negative or counter version so the spirit is that from God is one that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God and that spirit that's not from God is the spirit of the antichrist of which you've heard that it is coming in effect from earlier teaching from Jesus predictions and now it's already in the world just as John said in chapter 2 verse 18 children it's the last hour the antichrist has come don't think all of a sudden here we are in 2005 and the last days have begun they were already in existence when John wrote this letter they began really after the resurrection we're still in the last days we're 2,000 years closer to Jesus return but the last days began when Jesus well rose and ascended to heaven false teachers have been around ever since then leading people astray and away from the truth about Jesus and the issue in this don't we need to distinguish is is not an issue of intellectual error as though somebody is just somehow ignorant and says I don't really think Jesus came in the flesh not so much that it's an issue of rebellion it's a denial the word deny came out quite a few times in that to verse 18 passage onwards that is it's not somebody who's just ignorant and looking for the truth but is yet to quite grasp it it's somebody who outrightly denies the truth they're from the antichrist or they are the antichrist there are many of them indeed John is saying signs of the last days and they should not cause us alarm don't think oh dear here we are in the last days this is just going to be shocking way of life or something like that because see how John goes on in verse 4 little children you're from God and have conquered them for the one who's in you is greater than the one who's in the world you see we're not fighting against flesh and blood it's not our strength that matters it's God in us that matters he's stronger than the devil the devil may unleash a great fury in these last days we know that all too well like the Germans after D-day but before VE day so it is in the last days the war's over the victory was won on the cross but it's not yet mopped up so to speak and so there's great deal of fury in the devil left great deal of power still but God's greater and to have conquered them doesn't mean that you've somehow defeated them it's not a jihad conquest or killing off of them the false teachers not at all that what it is to conquer is to resist the temptation to go after them to stand firm in faith that's conquest same idea in the book of

Revelation many times as well God's holding on to his own it's a wonderful assurance in these last days we have nothing to fear we stand firm in faith God's greater than the one who's against us we hold fast to what is true got nothing to fear the world of course is at enmity with God and the last two verses of tonight's passage verses 5 and 6 paint that portrait it firstly describes the false prophets and the world in verse 5 and then it describes God and his people Christians in verse 6 deliberate contrast notice that verse 5 is they are from the world verse 6 begins we are from God they and we they're from the world we're from God and then the description of those in the world is therefore what they say is from the world and the world listens to them we're from God whoever knows God listens to us whoever's not from God does not listen to us in this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error contrast the world false prophets listening to each other God his people listening to

God and God's faithful apostles teaching now these are important verses actually because John here is in one sense explaining the success of the false prophets and that's a rattling thing if you're part of a church where people leave to go after some false teaching especially where people flock to false teaching and you get you know great crowds you think well here am I just a small church here and and they're all going out after this great what's they got that I haven't got it can be a rattling experience John saying don't be surprised by that sort of thing you see those people belong to the world they they're going to listen to the world they're not going to listen to the truth that's why they've gone out there after that preaching they're itching ears are longing to hear that sort of stuff it explains why the gospel is rejected by so many people because they belong to the world and they're not going to listen now I'm often amazed about at the nonsense people believe people sometimes think the Christian faith is just sort of a great big step in the dark blind faith I think it's very far from that I think it's the most rational belief that anyone can have I'm astonished that people believe in horoscopes for example where it's just manifestly nonsense self-contradictory why is it well people belong to the world they love darkness more than light they want spirituality without morality and so they convince themselves that something's in it they like somebody to take control over their life and abrogate responsibility for their decisions and so on I sometimes wonder about people who are atheists which is a fairly arrogant position to take it's one thing to be an agnostic but to be an atheist and say there is no God anywhere I've looked everywhere and there isn't a God but so many atheists are actually they know that it's not a viable position Aldous Huxley was a famous atheist and the reason he was an atheist was so that he could live sexually immorally I think Michael

[51 : 56] Foucault the great philosopher was the same as well I remember hearing I can't remember where it was but just in the last week or two some discussion either in the in a paper a journal an email or something about some scientists who who realize that there is an intelligent design but are so committed not to not to have a God that they believe the most fanciful thing about parallel universes and stuff that there is for which there is no evidence at all because they're trying to escape the reality of God we ought not to be surprised by this that was a Chesterton who said when people give up believing in in God it's not that they believe nothing it's that they believe anything and and that's what's happening in our world in John's day as well we ought not be surprised at people believing nonsense they're trying to escape from the truth they belong to the world and not to God and not to the truth and in effect that's what what John is really saying here in a way nor must we sort of confuse ourselves about the gospel yes so often it seems to me that when Christians preach the gospel faithfully but for little return the temptation is to try something else or modify the gospel I think that's a great danger I must confess with the alpha course that I think is not the gospel in the end it's it's it's imbalanced to try and water it down to make it more appetizing I think it's completely wrong theologically to do that because it misunderstands people living in the darkness it's trying to water it down to make it more attractive to get them in but it actually doesn't get them into what really is the gospel and on that particular issue I think it's weak in particular on sin and repentance and so on unless of course

God acts and clears out deaf ears and changes hearts no one will respond to the gospel that's a Bible's view it's John's view here he's trying to reassure his readers there's nothing wrong with them that may be big crowds have gone out after false teaching he's reassuring them that they stand in the truth they may have been in a sense left behind by those who've gone out from their midst but that's because they are standing in the truth as children of God and to avoid becoming children of the devil if they were to go after the false teaching in a sense John's giving us a worldview so that we're not rattled when similar things happen in our own day and age notice finally sorry this has been longer than I thought tonight was going to be short but anyway load notice finally that the key distinction in verses 5 and 6 those in the world listen to themselves or the false teachers those belonging to God listen to God as spoken through the apostolic preaching for us in the scriptures given to us test there for us to whom do we listen to the world or to

God are we listening to scripture does that lead us to love that's truth in action does it lead us to obedience and doctrinal correctness does that then lead us to assurance of sins forgiven and boldness to pray and boldness to approach God and does that lead us to have confidence that we'll stand before him on the day when Jesus returns let's pray he's known for you to listen to him on the day when he winds upon storm passing my mind and 15 00 Section Philippine and Philly and me our Earl he's adequated him