

1 John 3:19-4:6

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[0 : 00] Spirit of the living God, thank you for being alive in our hearts this day. Guide us into all truth this morning as we discern with your help the truth of who you are and who we are in you.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, who has come in the flesh to bear your good news to the world. Amen. Amen. So as has already been noted, today we are celebrating Pentecost and the arrival of God's presence to fill his church with the Holy Spirit.

And I don't know if this has been mentioned already in this service, but the breakdown of our One John series was done by one of our Chidzo apprentices, Sarah, who is at St. Pete's. And her spark of genius was to align her breakdown of the book with the church calendar.

And in particular, to align today's passage with Pentecost. And honestly, her doing so helped me so much because it makes it easier to see how both halves of the passage are working together to speak to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

And they're especially speaking to how the Spirit helps us discern the truth of God. The truth of God within ourselves, in chapter 3, and the truth of God within the world, in chapter 4.

[1 : 27] So we'll focus our reflections there this morning. Discerning God's truth about ourselves and discerning God's truth about the world. We're going to start by looking at these verses at the end of chapter 3.

And more than anything, this paragraph is intended to be deeply reassuring that the presence of the Spirit binds our lives to God's truth.

Like sailors being tied to a mast when other tempting voices are trying to entice us away from his truth. At the beginning of verse 19, John says, By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him.

And this is pointing back to the verses that we talked about last week in 17 and 18 in particular. And John has just exhorted the believers to keep their hearts open and generous to those who are in need.

And he describes this kind of love as loving in deed and in truth. So to start our passage this week, John is saying that when believers are showing this kind of love to each other, that becomes the evidence within our own lives that gives us confidence that we are of the truth.

[2 : 45] Or to say that differently, it's the reassurance that we are living according to the will and wisdom of God. And then John circles back to this in a slightly different way at the end in verses 23 and 24, when he's talking about the commandment, singular, that sets the whole trajectory of our life in Christ.

To believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another. Now John has revisited this theme over and over again in the letter up to this point.

But John immediately follows up this challenge with the most wonderful promise.

John says that the person of integrity, whose faith and whose actions are an integrated whole, John says that that person abides in God. And God abides in that person.

And we know that God abides in us by the Spirit whom he has given us. Now if you're like me, you read that verse and then ask, well, how do we know if we have the Spirit?

[4 : 08] And John, who really loves to make circular arguments, would basically say that the evidence of the Spirit is a transformed life. Spiritual discernment, or discerning the presence of the Spirit, isn't necessarily a mystical endeavor.

It's not like a tingly feeling we get, or a voice whispering in our ear. However, it's that the Spirit's presence is observable through our everyday life. Because the Spirit is the agent that is aligning our lives with God's truth.

And in the West, we're really tempted to just see that, as the Spirit aligning our lives with right doctrines about God. But again, John has just said that we know we are of the truth by our love for others.

So confessing the right things about the person of Jesus, and living a life that mirrors the person of Jesus, are equally, mutually, inextricably bound as the evidence that the Spirit is working in us.

And John's essential point in this paragraph that he really wants to emphasize is that this is good news. Yes, these words are certainly challenging, because they're, you know, challenging us to examine our lives, and to see if our actions are lining up with our words and our confession.

[5 : 34] But what John is emphasizing here is that when you see the fruit of the Spirit in your life, when you are sacrificially generous, when you are loving your church and your neighborhood, when you do confess that Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh, it is unshakably true that God is in you, and you are in God.

And John knows what a battle it is for Christians to actually believe that. He says whenever our hearts condemn us, not if our hearts condemn us, but when they condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

No matter how faithful you are, we face this constant temptation to doubt that we are really loved by God. We really are forgiven.

We really have been welcomed into his presence. And it's like we're constantly being plagued by imposter syndrome, no matter how much our lives are being conformed by the Spirit into the mold of Christ.

And our hearts, they want to condemn us, to say, I'm not a good enough Christian, or God can't really love me the way I am, or he's not really present in my life.

[6 : 57] And so we live in this swirl of conflicting narratives within ourselves. And it's the presence of the Spirit that helps us cut through that noise. What is true is that the God who knows absolutely everything about us is greater than our hearts, and he has declared us innocent and not condemned.

He's declared that he abides with us, even when we don't experience his presence. He is transforming us into the image of his Son, making us to be people who love like him.

And the glimmers in our life where we see that happening are enough to assure us that God is indeed at work in us, whether we feel him or not.

A remarkable example of this truth is Mother Teresa, who expressed unwavering faith in Christ and lived a life of unwavering witness to Christ's love.

She proclaimed him in word and in deed. But what was discovered in letters after her death was that Mother Teresa spent the majority of her years in Calcutta feeling God's presence was completely absent from her.

[8 : 18] And I in no way want to minimize the excruciating pain of feeling forsaken by God. Jesus himself knows that pain of forsakenness on the cross.

But it is good news that the presence of the Spirit gives us assurance that God's truth stands above that experience, binding us to him and transforming us in him.

And that assurance girds us against our condemning hearts and frees us to confidently enjoy communion with God. As John transitions to chapter 4, he moves from talking about discerning God's truth within ourselves to discerning God's truth in the world.

At the end of chapter 3, God has given us his spirit of truth. But then God immediately recognizes, or John immediately recognizes at the beginning of chapter 4, that we will encounter messages and narratives from spirits that seek to counter the truth of God.

And here again, we see the spiritual and the ordinary intermingling. John is speaking about false prophets, about real people in the early church who were spreading messages that didn't acknowledge the true identity of Jesus in their teaching.

[9 : 44] And John is telling us to use all of our faculties of reason to discern one teaching from another, simply by holding it up against the teachings of Jesus and the witness of the apostles.

So this testing is a spiritual exercise, not because it somehow supersedes our use of reason, but because, according to John, behind these messages that are coming from ordinary people and from institutions and systems and cultural narratives, there is behind all of these a spiritual reality that stems from a spiritual agent who is active in the world and who is actively anti-Christ.

His mission is to spread lies and accusations that distort the truth of God. But rather than stirring up fear in us that this spiritual antagonism exists in the world, John's goal again here is assurance.

He's saying we have everything we need to stand strong and ultimately be victorious against these lies. Not because of our remarkable wit or apologetic prowess, but because the Spirit of God who is in us is greater than the Spirit who is in the world that is anti-Christ.

And again, I think this becomes relevant when we see the consequences of God's people not trusting the truth that he has already overcome the world.

[11 : 25] We have examples of this all the way back to the people of Babel who are trying to make a name for themselves rather than trusting in the name, confessing the name of Yahweh.

We have the Israelites before the exile making alliances with powerful nations rather than trusting that allegiance to God is sufficient. We have today a rise in Christian nationalism and the desire to forward Christian interests on the backs of corrupt politicians rather than standing firm and united in love within the people of God.

From time immemorial, the world has presented its alternate Messiah figures, either in political leaders or cultural influencers or business ventures, and their messages are dangerous because their core is antagonistic to the confession that Jesus is the Messiah who has come in the flesh.

But we aren't to be afraid of these forces and we certainly aren't to try and ally ourselves with them. But we are to be aware of their presence and their influence in the world and sharpen our discernment by testing these messages with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

So looking at the big picture again to close us out here, if you take away one truth to anchor you this week, it is that God is greater.

[13 : 02] God is greater than the lies we tell ourselves when our hearts try to condemn us. God is greater than the lies the world tells, and so we need not be afraid of them.

The Spirit of truth has come upon God's people and sealed us as His beloved children, free from accusation and condemnation, victorious over the enemy, safe and loved and transformed in His presence.

I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen. Amen.