

1 John 4 – Part B

1 John 4:1

^{1Jn 4:1} Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

One of the real issues facing the modern church is that the church **MUST** develop the ability to think rightly and discerningly about spiritual truth. It should be obvious to any discerning Christian that biblical error comes in many different forms, and very often it can look very good. That is why it is often called “**deception**”. False teaching has within it the innate ability to deceive. Magicians use what they call “sleight of hand”. In a similar way, false teachers’ misuse of Scripture to support their false doctrinal positions could easily be called “sleight of mind”. It is the idea that you just quote a few Scriptures and use a few Scriptural words – and bingo, you are an authority on some subject. The worse problem that happens is that when confronted with the truth, the mainline false teachers and fake healers try to make your interpretation of the truth to be from the devil. Kenneth Copeland, for instance, has publically stated that those who do not agree with his teaching, and I quote, “*have fallen for a lie straight from the pit of hell*”. In essence, he is violating the heart of [1 John 4:1](#) by not allowing his teaching to be tested. No legitimate Bible teacher should discourage anyone from testing what it is that they are teaching. The immature or spiritually lazy Christian who has no driving and earnest desire to be discerning about spiritual matters will ultimately find themselves to be just that – undiscerning. The problem that so many unsuspecting believers in the current Christian culture have is that they have based their spiritual perspective on a personal desire to be happy, wealthy, comfortable, and satisfied. However, it is critical to the life of a discerning Christian that they **CANNOT** allow their feelings to be the controlling factor as to what they believe. Biblical doctrine and spiritual truth has no association whatsoever with personal feelings – none. In fact, personal feelings about spiritual matters can often be the greatest hindrance that a believer has to actually being discerning. Unless a believer is willing to examine all things carefully, they cannot hope to have any defense against irresponsible faith.

In approaching a subject like false teaching, it is important to appreciate what false teaching actually does within an individual. False teaching removes a believer’s spiritual strength and discernment, and eventually dilutes their actual love for God. It drives them to a spiritual position of what they can get from God, or on the other extreme to what do they have to do to please God, or what would be called a works salvation. For instance, all of the teaching of the false cults drives them to a works based salvation. In essence, a false teacher or a false prophet is blatantly and deliberately resisting that which they know to be true, and eventually that same spiritual mentality and perspective becomes engrained in those who listen to them. The problem this creates is actually very simple to understand. The more someone resists truth, the more they will yield to sin and in that subtle process they become less and less able to understand spiritual truth when it is accurately taught. Over the years I have personally had friendships with believers who became entangled in the “health and wealth” gospel and the “confess it and possess it” gospel of the charismatic movement. They listened intently to their famous teachers – Smith Wigglesworth, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Aimee McPherson, A.A. Allen, Oral Roberts, Kathryn Kuhlman, T.L. Osborne, Todd Bentley, and Benny Hinn, and many more, and became so indoctrinated into their false teaching that it was almost impossible to even talk to them intelligently about the Scriptures. The teachers so twisted the Scriptures that the true meaning of Scripture was

completely lost and abandoned. If the proper research was done on each of the false teachers, it would become readily apparent that the vast majority of them have never received a biblical education that helped them to understand how to rightly divide God's word. The consequence is simply that their ignorance in how to interpret Scripture properly dominated their teaching.

Now, John has placed these words before us at the end of a long teaching on continued and habitual sin and what it means to love the brethren. This verse is a commandment and is not something that can be ignored or disregarded. The verb for **“test”** is in the present tense, imperative mood, and active voice. What all of that means is that believers are commanded to always be testing **“the spirits”**. Because it is in the active voice, it means that it is the responsibility of the believer to actually test **“the spirits” themselves**. The way that the word **“spirits”** is used in this passage is very important to understand. Obviously, no one is right about everything, and just because someone has taught something that may be in error does not necessarily indicate that they are a false teacher. This word, however, refers to someone that embodies teaching that is actuated by a demonic spirit. So in the context, the term **“the spirits”** refers to people whose teaching has been stimulated and triggered by actual demons. It is not referring to someone who just mistakenly mishandles the Word of God. Then to make it worse, the specific people to whom John is referring are the teachers, pastors, and evangelists who regularly circulated throughout the various local churches.¹ Just think for a moment of the problem that this created for the local churches. Here is the apostle John warning the churches about casually accepting the teaching of the itinerant preachers that were very prevalent in the early church. To make things worse, the New Testament had not been yet completed and many believers had questions that they would ask of these itinerant preachers and teachers. We experience this same phenomena in other countries in which we teach. Many of the pastors and believers do not have adequate resources to properly exegete the word of God, and very often the tendency is to accept the teaching of anyone who comes along. The false teachers are very persuasive and their teaching is extremely appealing to someone who lacks discernment. Just think for a moment of what a huge following Joel Osteen has. His books make the Best Seller list everytime he writes one. He pastors the largest church in America! He is actually called and introduced as a “bestselling author”, yet he is such a false teacher that it defies the imagination. In one of the countries that we teach in I asked who was their favorite teacher and they responded that it was Benny Hinn.

So what John is doing is providing a very strong exhortation for the believers to validate the teaching that was being promoted in their local churches. In reality, every believer should be doing exactly that – evaluating what they are being taught. The only meaningful way that any teaching can be tested is to evaluate and measure it against the Word of God. The problem that is often encountered is that when an individual is not meaningfully familiar with the Word of God, then in all likelihood they have no reasonable means of actually testing what it is that they have heard. The Word of God is the standard against which every teaching must be evaluated. Words must be understood. Verb tenses, which are very critical to a meaningful exposition of a passage, must be understood. The context of a passage must be understood. The nuances of the Greek language must be understood, or the reader cannot fully expect to always come to the proper conclusion and understanding of a passage. For instance, in v2, one of the key words that must be addressed is the word **“confesses”**. Every false teacher will confess that they are true believers and are teaching the truth – every one of them, all of the time. So just saying the right

words does not mean that someone is actually “confessing” Christ in a biblical way. In reality they are using all of the right words, but the words are being used in a way that manipulates the one who is listening to their false message. False teachers are deceptive and they will tell people whatever they need to tell them in order to gain their confidence. They will make their message pleasant, unique, and enjoyable in order to gain the confidence of their audience. So, an understanding of the word “confesses” is utterly critical to a proper understanding of that verse.

Without overstating the obvious, it should be clear that genuine biblical discernment cannot be divorced from a diligent study of the Scriptures. If a person has any kind of sincere desire to have godly discernment in their life, then they must cultivate a hunger for studying the Word of God. Without a mature knowledge of the Scriptures, believers will find themselves blatantly off-course in matters that require discernment. They will be left to their feelings about these matters and will fall prey to all of the false claims made by the modern day spiritual thieves.

Once again, because the word “test” is in the imperative mood this is not optional for the believer. It is a command that cannot be unheeded. Why is this so critical? It is because there is a devil, there are false prophets and false teachers, there are deceiving spirits, and there are principalities and rulers of darkness in high places ([Ephesians 6:12](#)). In the spiritual realm there are spiritual forces at work just as much as there are godly entities working. In [1 John 3:24](#), John talks about the Holy Spirit, and now in these verses he begins to talk about unholy spirits. Please appreciate that **the spirits that John is addressing are demonic spirits that are specifically working in people to undermine the truth.** John uses the term in v1 as “**many false prophets**”. These unholy spirits are working in people, in teachers, and in leaders within the overall church community. They are experts at deception.

The word for “test” in v1 is a very important word. It is the governing verb in this entire passage which extends to v6. Everything is founded on the believer being faithful to determine the trustworthiness of the one teaching them. It is what John wants his readers to actually do – “test”. It is the Greek word “*dokimazo*”. It has the idea of examining something in order to approve it.² The word is used in [1Thessalonians 2:4](#) to determine if someone is qualified to be entrusted with the gospel.

^{1Th 2:4} But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.

In [1 Timothy 3:10](#), deacons are to first be tested.

^{1Ti 3:10} But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being *found* blameless.

Scripture declares that all of our works will be “tested by fire” ([1 Peter 1:7](#)) to determine if they were false or genuine. As the word is utilized in [1 John 4:1](#) it carries the specific sense of scrutinizing and examining what is being taught. The goal of the testing is to save the good and discard that which is false and to prove whether or not someone is worthy of what they are doing. If someone took their car to a mechanic and later came to find out that the mechanic had no training and no experience, it would be doubtful whether or not they would ever take their car back to that mechanic. So, if a believer knew that what someone was teaching was not actually true, it would be in their best interest to stop listening to that person – no matter how much they may actually “enjoy” their teaching. Today there is a great deal of solid biblical teaching that is available for people to listen to – John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul,

Mark Dever, Albert Mohler, and many, many more. Also, there are a number of good reformed seminaries that offer free courses that people can listen to. I have personally downloaded many of the courses offered by Covenant Theological Seminary and listened to them while driving in my truck. They were quite edifying and encouraging. Please appreciate that the more of God's truth that a believer places into their heart and mind, the more godly they will become. The Word of God rightly divided is the primary tool that the Spirit of God uses to mature a believer.

Now, the phrase in [1 John 4:1](#) that should arrest our attention is the phrase “**Beloved, do not believe...**” Obviously John is writing to believers who he thinks have a tendency to believe these evil spirits, or most likely he would not have even mentioned this. Because no one at church is getting drunk on a regular basis, teaching on that is not something that even needs to be addressed. However, if that was a prevailing problem, I would certainly address it. Once again, the word for “**believe**” is in the present tense, imperative mood, and active voice. It could actually be translated as “**stop believing**”. The ISV actually interprets it that way. Interpreting it that way essentially reinforces and emphasizes the idea that John was addressing a very real issue in the local church. John is not making a suggestion here. He is actually commanding these Christians to stop believing everything that is being taught by others. The way that John communicates this could actually be considered a strong reproof to these believers. There are times as a pastor that I have been stunned by the things that Christians watch on Christian television channels. It staggers me that there often times appears to be no meaningful discernment relative to the teachers to whom people actually listen. However, and this is important, God holds each of us responsible for who we allow to teach us. So, it must be understood that false teachers have perfected the art of false teaching.

Now, at this point it is important to make a critical observation from the rest of Scripture. [1 John 3:24](#) clearly states that the Holy Spirit has been given to the believer and abides in the believer. In [1 John 4:4](#), John states that the Spirit of God who lives in the believer gives the believer the spiritual capacity and power to overcome these false spirits.

1Jn 4:4 You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, BECAUSE He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

The word “**because**” should arrest our attention. Discernment is not natural, but spiritual, and it should always be seen that way. That verse is not suggesting that believers confront demons, but is simply stating that the believer has the God ordained spiritual capacity to be discriminating and to exercise biblical discernment relative to false teaching and evil spirits. Satan's strategy has always been very evident. Within the church and within its biblical teaching, Satan's strategy is to mix error with truth. It does not have to be a lot of error, but just a little error. If someone were to blatantly contradict Scripture and its clear teachings, then that would not be difficult to discern. If you heard someone teaching that Jesus Christ did not really die, or that Jesus Christ did not really arise from the dead, or that there is no eternal judgment, then you should be able to immediately refute those assertions. Anyone who knows anything about the Word of God should be able to do that. However, when there is a very subtle admixture of error in a passage, very often that small amount of inaccuracy is much more difficult to discern. Then when that small amount of error is passionately communicated by a false teacher, people have a tendency to simply accept it as truth – and so the slippery slope of false teaching begins.

There must be discernment. It is imperative that the church, that its pastors and teachers, and that its spiritual leaders be people with discernment. There must be discernment. Some people seem to accept anything they read or anything that they watch as being accurate if the individual simply claims to be a Christian. [2 Corinthians 11:13-15](#) says that not only is Satan disguised as an “**angel of light**”, but that his servants are disguised as “**servants of righteousness**”.

^{2Co 11:13} For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. ¹⁴And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. ¹⁵Therefore *it is* no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

The enemy’s tactic is to teach subtle error as biblical truth. If he can get someone to just believe one small lie, then he can get them to believe the next small lie. It does not matter to the enemy how long all of that takes just so long as he can gain a foothold through false teaching. The principle is very simple – biblical error leads to more biblical error. False teaching leads to more false teaching, and that is why it is so important for believers to “**test the spirits**” to see “**whether they are of God**”. The only element of importance is whether or not what is being taught is of God and therefore true, and for someone to know that they have to know the Word of God themselves. Personal intelligence, ideas, and notions have no value.

ENDNOTES

¹ Wuest, 1 John, 159.

² Strong, 1048.

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