

1 John 4:1-11. Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. 4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. 7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

This is love for God to obey his commands

1. Test the spirits.

2. Speak the truth in love.

What I am about to say might be heard and viewed by some as harsh, unloving, and intolerant talk? Are you ready? Here goes: *Be warned. Not all religions are the same. Not all churches are the same. And some of things that this world is saying and doing in the name of love is not loving at all.* In love a Christian like me might speak about such things, not to be divisive or to hateful. We speak of such things not for our own advantage or gain, but in love and concern for our neighbor and out of love for God. In his love for us God has given us the truth of his saving word. In love for God we will examine that which is proclaimed in the world around us and test it according to Scripture. We will not join with those who speak contrary to the Word, but we will differentiate between what is right and wrong based on the wisdom that comes from God. And speaking the truth in love, the LORD leads us back to the cross as the indispensable part of our love for each other.

Last week we talked about loving our neighbor not only with words and tongue, but in spirit and truth. John warned his listeners of an empty kind of love and encouraged them to demonstrate kindness, to live lives of love; to bear that good fruit of Christian love. Today we hear much of the same. Love each other as Christ loved you and yet as John continues to circle back to that theme, his instructions to his dearly beloved friends and spiritual children now more acutely address a love for souls. In love and concern for the eternal souls of his fellow believers he gives this instruction, ***Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*** In Christian love, out of concern for eternal souls and their spiritual well-being John encourages his dear Christian friends, “do not believe every spirit”, but he tells them to “test”, that is to examine the teachings and sentiments of those in world around them to see if they are from God. John is warning of false teachers and those who would mislead the believers in their walk of faith. With these words we are reminded how Jesus

himself warned his disciples against the dangers of false teachers, ***“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them.*** Matthew 17:15-16. The apostle Paul in his concern for souls instructs the believers in Rome in this way, ***¹⁷ I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. (Romans 16:17).*** We will certainly distance ourselves from false teachers, but there are also some things you just can’t keep away from. Widespread false teaching has crept into the accepted moral fabric of culture and society. Therefore, John’s words (along with Jesus’ words and Paul’s instruction) would serve as wise instruction for the believer today. We are to “test the spirits”, to evaluate, examine more deeply the teachings of the day; for such teaching might be misleading even though it is packaged as the teaching of love and tolerance and sometimes it might even bear the label of Christian. Be warned. Be prepared. ***Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the Spirits to see if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.***

In his encouragement to test the spirits there is included the encouragement to test, to examine pure doctrine as well as false teaching. In the faithful teaching and learning of God’s Word, this is where we know the love of God, this how we are trained to recognize the spirit of God and the spirit of falsehood. In love for God, for our children, for our fellow man, for our own soul, we will take time to be educated in God’s Word. Then blessed with a core foundation in the Word we will want to also be educated or at the very least aware of the issues that oppose the church. With such a foundation in God’s Word and with a knowledge of the issues of the day we can be prepared so that we will not be deceived, so that we can prepare our children and grandchildren for the kinds of conversations and worldviews and religious teachings that they will encounter for there are a lot of different teachings and teachers out there. Our children, or grandchildren, will be spiritually vulnerable to those who are waiting out in the secular world (high school, college, and the work place) and who often seek to attack or challenge the Christian in his or her faith. In love for their spiritual well-being, let’s prepare the next generation, and that means preparing ourselves. Test, examine, ask questions; and that even means asking questions about our own beliefs so that we may deepen our understanding in God’s Word. Staying connected with the word and with good and faithful teachers of the word who will answer your questions by taking you to Scripture is a high priority for a believer living in this sinful world full of error and deceit. Forgive us Lord for not treating our spiritual welfare with such high priority, and help us Lord to grow in our faith through continuing instruction in your Word!

A faith connected with the Word can tell the difference between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error or falsehood. The word for falsehood here literally has the idea of deceiving and walking off the path. How clearly it seems that society and false teachers have gone off the rails on certain things? God has created man in such a way that we long for truth. We all long for rules that make sense, that protect and benefit society. But mankind has lost the image of God and in that sinful state instead of looking to God’s word for truth this world has reached for pseudo-standards that are really no standard at all. The teachings of the day have created a moving moral target that creates even more confusion. The world in its wisdom has created for itself a sexual freedom outside of marriage that can never be free, but such a freedom only harbors regret and hurt, self-serving abusers and broken victims, and a whole lot of people languishing somewhere in between as God’s wonderful gift for man and wife has been made an empty shell of itself by rampant abuse. Forgive us Lord for mistreating your gifts as well. The world in its wisdom has taken that which for centuries has been basic observable truth in the difference between boys and girls, males and females, and has thrown it carelessly into the wind, all under the false pretense of love. This is not love and we know it!

But false teachers often align themselves with the powers and the wisdom of this world in a bullish effort to lead people to believe in their wisdom rather than the wisdom of God. The weight of such popular opinion can lead believers to think that we are on the wrong side of truth, the wrong side of the discussion, the wrong side of history. We are tempted to think that we are on the losing side as more and more pile on their opinion. As the hands go up around us in favor of this or that, there is pressure to join the crowd. As the young Christian advances from grade to grade there is pressure to let go of the truth of creation as described in the Bible and slide over into the seemingly bigger camp of those who teach and believe that evolution is how we got here. There is mounting pressure to blur the lines of moral decency to tolerate perversions of God's gracious design, from ignoring what constitutes life, to do away with God's design for male and female and throwing away his plan for the family. There is pressure to let go of biblical teaching and to be swept away with the rising tide of boisterous opinion and so often it comes coated with a false veneer of love. But as these pressures continue to mount and this tide continues to rise God tells us that he's got us. The devil would have us believe that we are all alone holding on to some feeble branch in the middle of a rushing current that will no doubt sweep us away eventually, so we might as well let go. But God who formed the oceans and set forth the rhythm of the tides stands at our side like the sturdiest and highest of mountains and he tells us that he's got us. In fact, he assures us that we are the victors. As those noisy tides of popular opinion crash against this mountain there is nothing that can do except make noise. God stands with us. By faith we stand safely on his word. We have overcome the devil, the world, and all who would conspire against his children. We are never alone, and we are never even in the minority when we stand on God's Word, when we listen to his voice, for he tips the scales. His word has the final say. He will win the day. He is the one who is greater, who is eternal. He is the one who fills the universe. He is the God only wise, infallible, holy and divine. And that same God assures us that he dwells with us, and within us. And so now we are called to stand in love. We demonstrate Christian love to our fellowman as we stand as a beacon of truth in this world that has lost its way.

In Proverbs chapter 13, the Lord gives us these words of wisdom. ¹¹ *My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke,* ¹² *because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.* ¹³ *Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding,* ¹⁴ *for {wisdom} is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.* God's Word speaks of the lasting value of knowing our eternal salvation in Christ Jesus. God's Word speaks of the lasting value of knowing right and wrong. God disciplines and teaches his children right and wrong through his word and this is good and right and wonderful. In love for each other let us not be afraid to teach our children and teach each other right from wrong. Let us love each other enough to actually care enough to say no to lies, to steer our children and our fellow man back on course; to speak against deceit and to speak up for truth. Parents love their children and therefore they discipline, teach, correct, rebuke, to prepare them for deception and falsehood and to lead them to the truth. If I was to teach my child that the grass is blue, because that's what he wants to call it, that's not loving, that's falsehood, that's careless, self-seeking madness that betrays short-term convenience for long term wisdom and blessing. If am to teach my child the word of God, this is not brainwashing, or taking away my child's right to choose for himself, but this is good and wise, beneficial and loving, for it is caring for eternal soul.

Without the knowledge of God from Scripture, the best the world can do is define wisdom and love based on their flawed morals, their own corrupt and faulty views. As sinners, if we are honest, we know that we are self-serving beings who are by nature fundamentally corrupt and in the grand scheme of eternity are horribly short-sighted. To know God is to know a being who is eternal and who is the ultimate epitome of love. To know him as he is to be known, is to see from His own Holy Word. To

know God is to read and to know and to hear how He loved us. In his love he created us. In his love he gave us his commands, to show us our faults, to curb our sinful habits, to provide for the good of his creation by protecting us from ourselves and from each other. In his love he has given us his righteous commands to show us our unrighteousness and our deep need for a Savior, whom he so graciously provides. In his love he gives us his law to give us a thirst for a time when things will finally be - fully and forever - right again. He gives his law and his gospel, telling us how he has come to forgive us sinners, to restore to us the image of God. In his Word he gives us this wonderful taste of how things truly ought to be, God and man dwelling in harmony

God has made it so that we will know the harmony with God, that perfection. He made that possible by sending his Son to be our Savior. Jesus lived and suffered and died in our place to be the all atoning sacrifice for our sins. God's own Son suffered in the place of sinful man as an innocent victim. He paid the price for our salvation. In selfless love God took on flesh and laid down his life for undeserving sinners. This, my friends, is love.

Within the last few months I stumbled across a person from this area who follows a group that teaches that it would not be in the loving nature of God to sacrifice his Son. In their way of seeing things that would be too cruel and unloving for God to do. In making this human argument and teaching this they have constructed for themselves a god who is loving as defined by their own terms, but in so doing they trample over and distort the very truth that most highly demonstrates the love of our LORD. They abandon the truth of Scripture, and therefore, they are not from God. From what I can tell they seem to discard the mystery of the Trinity and are unable to confess that Jesus is indeed true God who took on flesh for the very purpose of giving himself for us. In this human theory human teachers discard the unparalleled love of the cross for something that is more palatable to their minds and their human understanding. This too is unloving deception for in this mishandling of the word of God it redefines who God has revealed himself to be and changes the very essence of God. It is not love, to change and alter who God is to appear more loving and more appealing to the masses. No, such false teaching deceives and misleads people away from the truth of Scripture and undermines the very love of God that he has revealed to us in his Word. This is not wisdom, this is not love, this is falsehood that leads precious souls into spiritual confusion and into the snares of the evil one.

Those who have the Word of God, who have the Spirit of truth, know and recognize the truth. Therefore, in love we will test the spirits to determine if they are from God. Those who belong to God through faith, we listen to God. We are his sheep, he is our shepherd and we listen to his voice. We hear his voice in those who speak the word of God correctly. By faith, and with the Holy Spirit's help we can tell the difference between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error of falsehood for God has gifted us with his Word. In love, dear Christians, we test, we examine, and with the Spirit's help we will distinguish between the spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. We will speak with gentleness and respect as we address those who teach falsehood, and we will speak the truth in love. Thus, we say such statements, in love and in care for eternal souls: *Be warned. Not all religions are the same. Not all churches are the same. And some of things that this world is saying and doing in the name of love is not loving at all.*

Finally, know this above all. God is love. He cares about us so much that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ our LORD, to suffer, die, and rise again, to take away your sins, to restore to you the image of God, and to give you heaven. Your God cares so much about your eternal soul that he has blessed his church on earth with his Holy Word. Thanks be to God! *Amen.*