

Text: 1 Jn 4.1

As you can see, I am resorting to a recorded video for tonight's message. Due to the virus crisis, we are unable to meet so we are trying for the "next best thing."

I've discussed using Zoom (or an equivalent) for our Sunday Bible study time. We will work try that this coming Sunday. It is a possible option for Wednesday as well, but it will take some setup for some of you, so tonight we will just do the video.

I don't think we should share our prayer requests publicly, but if you have requests you would like us to pray about, please send them in. We will lead the group in prayer, referring to specific requests in a general way so as to not cause a problem for anyone.

~ Prayer time

Read 1 Jn 4.1-6, text 1

We are moving into a new chapter tonight, and into a section that I find as one of the keys to understanding 1 John.

The first thing we will talk about tonight is the general subject matter of this section, then the imperative which serves as John's proposition for this section, and finally his rationale.

I. The subject: the war behind all spiritual conflicts

From Danny Akin's opening discussion of this section:

"The last verse of chap. 3 provides a typical Johannine head-tail transition by use of the word 'Spirit.' Believers have the Spirit of God, but there are other spirits in the world (4:3). Further, 4:2a and 4:6d form basically an inclusion. John has already dealt with the conflict between truth and falsehood (2:18–28), the conflict between the children of God and the children of Satan (2:29–3:12), and the conflict between love and hatred (3:13–24). Given this conflict between the two spiritual realms, John exhorts his readers to test all spirits to determine their truthfulness and then gives the criteria for making this determination."¹

¹ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, The New American Commentary, v. 38 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 2001), 169–70.

A. The connection with chapter 3

1. Akin's "head-tail transition" — Holy Spirit mentioned in 3.24
2. Many spirits introduced in 4.1 and following

B. The conflicts mentioned in 1 John

1. Between truth and falsehood (2:18–28)
2. Between the children of God and the children of Satan (2:29–3:12)
3. Between love and hatred (3:13–24)

If you look back over the text, I think you will see this summarizes those sections nicely.

We see these conflicts in the world all the time. Why do they exist?

4. They exist as a reflection of the underlying conflict between the Spirit and the spirits

C. There is a war going on between God and Satan

1. God currently allows Satan (and his allies) to function, even though they oppose him
2. God's allowance reflects God's purposes
3. This passage reveals the root conflict for our guidance

II. The imperative: exercise spiritual discernment

A. The strong language of the imperative

1. We sometimes use another word for the directives God gives: "exhortation"
2. Scripture usually expresses exhortations with a form called "the subjunctive mood" — (subjunctives can be quite strong nonetheless)
3. In this case, the mood is imperative, a command

B. The command has two parts (two imperatives)

1. "Believe not"
2. "Test"

A call to “incredulity” — not hypercritical, but not credulous; a healthy questioning spirit, like the Bereans (Acts 17.10-11) who tested all things by the Scriptures.

C. The command against believing the spirits

1. The form could mean “stop believing” as if the people were wavering and accepting the false teaching of the false teachers
2. The general tone of 1 John goes against this: these believers were not taken in, but perhaps needed reinforcement in their determination
3. What does John mean by “spirit” here?
 - a. First, he means false prophets, see the rationale that follows
 - b. But second, he means that false prophets stand for the false spirits that motivate them

When it comes to false teaching, we aren’t just talking about some nice guy who got a few things wrong, we are talking about the war between the devil and God.

D. The command to test the spirits

1. The word comes from a stem that means “watching”²
2. The word is hopeful, not critical: testing whether genuine, not testing because of suspicion

“like coins being tested for genuineness or full weight”³
3. The goal is to see if the spirit is “out of God” — whether he truly gets his teaching from God
4. The subject is plural: the responsibility lies on all Christians, not just pastors

E. A summation

1. Every teacher should only find a hearing after testing

² Walter Grundmann, “Δόκιμος, Ἀδόκιμος, Δοκιμή, Δοκίμιον, Δοκιμάζω, Ἀποδοκιμάζω, Δοκιμασία,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 255.

³ Hiebert, “1 John 4.1-6 in BibSac 146,” 423.

2. God gives some extraordinary discernment (1 Cor 12.10 “discerning of spirits,” 1 Cor 14.29 “pass judgement”), but all Christians must develop their “spiritual Spidey sense”

1 Cor 12.10 and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, **and to another the distinguishing of spirits**, to another *various* kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues.

1 Cor 14.29 Let two or three prophets speak, and **let the others pass judgment.**

We shouldn't approach preachers with suspicious hearts, but we should reserve judgement before we've examined their message.

III. The rationale: the reality of many false prophets

A. Essential facts about false prophets

1. My translation: “pseudoprophets” – like real prophets, but not real prophets
2. There are many of them
3. They are a long-standing problem (perfect tense)

Jesus, Paul, and Peter all spoke of false prophets troubling Christianity

B. Essential problem with false prophets

1. Not so much that they pretend they are real prophets
2. But that they preach a false message

C. Consider the long-standing directions of Moses (Dt 18.20-22)

Dt 18.20-22 'But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.'²¹ "You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?'"²² "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him."

1. The preaching must agree with what God revealed
2. The preacher must speak in the name of the Lord (under divine appointment)
3. Any prophetic predictions must happen

Any failure in #1 or #3 make manifest whether the prophet truly speaks in the name of the Lord.

Conclusion:

We can't afford to be credulous when it comes to people speaking as if from the Lord. They promote much error and lead God's people astray.

- It used to be most of the television preachers we warned about
- Now we have the internet preachers as well

Some men are genuine, but you must test them.

Hiebert warns: "Speaking through the false prophets, these evil spirits are now making the world of mankind their lecture hall."⁴

⁴ Hiebert, "1 John 4.1-6 in BibSac 146," 424.