

**TEST AND FIGHT**  
**(SUNDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2018)**

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**Scripture: Deut. 13:1-6; 1 John 3:24-4:6**

**INTRODUCTION**

There is a story about a woman who came to acquire wealth and social prominence. Because of this she decided to have a book written about her family.

The author she chose discovered that one of her grandfathers was a murderer who was executed at the famous prison Sing Sing in New York. The woman was not excited about including this detail so she asked the author to write about this in a way that would hide the truth.

When the book appeared, this is how the story of her relative read:

“One of her grandfathers occupied the chair of applied electricity in one of America’s best-known institutions. He was very much attached to his position and literally died in the harness.”<sup>1</sup>

We might laugh at such attempted deception, but we must take seriously how satan has used deception as one of his weapons from the very beginning.

The battle for truth as we saw from our OT reading is not just something that started in the apostolic era.

Coupled with deception, satan employs another strategy. Not content to ever quit, satan keeps pushing his deception in order to get people to grow weary of continued fighting.

Look at how much attitudes have changed on key issues related to the family and basic morality in just the last 10-20 years.

Satan has been successful because many have just given up!

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<sup>1</sup> Illustrations for Biblical Preaching, #316.

We must be discerning and learn not to quit in the battle for truth.

Don't be naïve. **Test and fight!**

We will look at verses 1-6 in two parts.

### **1) TEST THE SPIRITS, 1 JOHN 4:1-3**

Before we focus on our text, let us consider where we are in our study of 1 John.

According to the outline that I am following, 1 John 3:9-4:6 is the center section of the book.

Verses 9-18 and 19-24 were focused on the themes of God's work of regeneration which leads to obedience and love.

For verses 9-18, I emphasized verse 16, **by this we know love**.

Think always of Christ. It is not a worldly softness or sentiment. It is not detachment, coldness, just duty. It is sacrifice and strength without limit.

For verses 19-24, I emphasized how love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, not a natural desire or inclination.

You will not always "feel" like loving as you should. You love when you truly look to Christ and in faith seek to obey Him and follow His example.

**Look for love in your life.**

**Even more look to the Triune God and His grace as your full assurance.**

Now in chapter 4:1-6, John shifts to another theme, and then again in 1 John 4:7 and following he returns back to teaching about love.

Let's look at the end of chapter 3.

**1John 3:24** Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him.

And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

Through the Spirit's work in our lives, we have assurance of our union and communion with God.

A direct reference to the Holy Spirit at the end of chapter 3 connects very well as John now speaks of deceiving spirits in chapter 4.

You notice that 4:1 begins with the word **beloved**.

This word is used five times by John in this short letter beginning with 3:2.

It shows that John is not writing from a distance but with great concern for his readers.<sup>2</sup>

And the word beloved also signals John is shifting the focus of the discussion.

In chapter 3, John has spoken of truth faith, true believing unto salvation.

But now the call is to not believe every spirit.

Christians can be naïve.

We are called to be loving and show concern. And the devil can exploit this if we are not careful.

Robert Yarbrough helpfully describes the context of John's two commands in verse 1 – don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits. He writes:

Greco-Roman religion of the time trafficked heavily in secret or privileged knowledge of sacred mysteries. There was "proliferation of personal dream revelations, oracles and their interpretation, magic and astrology"; in addition, there were "numerous exclusive groups offering initiates higher knowledge for their personal weal and salvation."<sup>3</sup>

John's commands in verse 1 were very applicable when first given and remain so today.

In verse 1, John uses the common word translated as spirit, *pneuma*.

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<sup>2</sup> Yarbrough, 219-220.

<sup>3</sup> Yarbrough, 222.

John uses this word in connection with the true ministry of the Holy Spirit and in contrast to the deception of the devil and his demons.

People might claim that they are speaking truth, that they are speaking according to the Holy Spirit.

But do not just believe their claims.

Test the spirits. Make sure what someone is saying is truly of God.

The end of verse 1 explains that many false prophets have gone out into the world.

And what made these false prophets especially dangerous is that they were threatening churches with their false message.

I don't have any statistics, but consider how many professed Christians follow what could be called demonic teachings or practices.

When we see a passage like this, we might have the tendency to say, well this doesn't really apply to me.

It is not that John is saying that every Christian is deceived or is about to fall into error.

John is commanding watchfulness.

Danger in terms of false teaching is always present.

Don't be naïve. **Test and fight!**

In verse 2 and later in verse 6, John gives two doctrinal tests to determine truth from error and false teachers from true teachers.<sup>4</sup>

By this you know...

Certainly, **love** is a key theme in John. **Knowing** is another very important theme in John.

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<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, s.v. 1 John 4:1-6.

Now verse 2 is not the only test for truth, but it is one of the most central and important tests for truth.

The test of orthodoxy in verse 2 is the proper confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

Sometimes the word flesh is used in a negative way, to speak of human nature affected by sin.

But here the word flesh speaks of the fully human nature that the Son of God permanently took on.

The grammar emphasizes that Jesus did not just make an appearance. What took place in Nazareth over 2000 years ago is still a present reality.

I am speaking of the incarnation, when Mary, a virgin, came to be with child by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now think of John dealing with those who denied this truth.

John could say, I was with Jesus for basically his whole life. I know this. As the opening verses emphasize, John heard Jesus, he saw Jesus, he looked upon him, his hands handled him.

Remember that John was writing maybe about 40 years after the ascension of Jesus.

And so, it is not surprising to see Satan attacking the doctrine of Christ.

In verse 3, John says that those who deny the true doctrine of Christ are in league with the antichrist. They have the spirit of antichrist.

Warning had already been given by the apostles about these matters.

John is saying that there is even at that time a present fulfillment.

Let's summarize verses 1-3 before moving to verses 4-6.

John commands that we have a healthy skepticism to people who claim that they are speaking truth by the Holy Spirit.

Everything that people claim is from God must be tested. The Word of God provides the ultimate standard. We need also the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Every generation of Christians must be alert.

It is not just pastors and teachers but all Christians who are to be watchful.

Consider the insights of John Calvin who thought very carefully about this passage in terms of the challenges that he faced.

He wrote this:

If everyone has the right and the liberty to judge, nothing can be settled as certain, but on the contrary the whole of religion will be uncertain.

Calvin wrote that there is a twofold testing that must be given, private and public.

The private trial is that by which everyone settles his own faith, when he wholly acquiesces in that doctrine which he knows has come from God; for consciences will never find a safe and tranquil port otherwise than in God.

The public trial refers to the common consent and polity of the Church.

There is a need for godly and faithful men to come together and agree in a holy and godly manner based on the clear teaching of Scripture.

How does this happen?

John Calvin wrote:

But as the old proverb is too true, "So many heads, so many opinions," it is doubtless a singular work of God, when he subdues our perverseness and makes us to think the same thing, and to agree in a holy unity of faith.

We need the Holy Spirit's work in our life individually and corporately so that we will submit to God's truth.

And we also consider in light of this passage that God has promised that His truth will prevail.

And we have a long record of this in terms of the preservation and keeping of God's Word and a legacy of faithful creeds and confessions that stand as testimonies to the truth of Scripture.

## 2) THERE IS VICTORY IN CHRIST, 1 JOHN 4:4-6

These three verses complete the discussion regarding the danger of false teaching.

Here John gives reassurance to his first readers in three ways in verse 4.

First, he says that they are of God.

This can be considered the central statement in verses 2-6.<sup>5</sup> Because of your belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, your acceptance of God's truth, your position before God is assured.

Don't let the false teachers persuade you of anything else.

Second, John identifies his readers as little children and yet they are also victors.

The word translated as little children is used 7 times in 1 John.

It is a reminder of how small, insignificant, and weak we are in the face of danger.

The world seems so powerful in comparison. We are just little children.

And yet there is this glorious reality. **There is victory.**

The word translated as overcome in verse 4 is the verb *nikao*, the basis for the word *nike*.

You might recall how this verb is used in each of the letters written to the seven churches, the promise given to those who overcome.

Who have they overcome we should ask?

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC 51; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 216.

John doesn't explicitly say, but in the context we can say it is the false teachers, the spirit of antichrist, and those in league with them.<sup>6</sup>

The third point of encouragement gives the reason for this victory.

**He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.**

Isn't this such an encouraging and comforting truth?

So, although we are to be alert, we are certainly not to be controlled by worry or fear.

We don't rest in our own strength. We are not to think highly of our own ability or power.

No, like children we trust in our Father, we rest in the victory and power of our Lord.

John makes several more important points in verses 5 and 6.

As he continues he emphasizes that false teachers are loved by the world.

I think here of those false teachers or compromisers who get their short fame on National Public Radio or CNN.

The world is very happy to give a few minutes of time to heretics.

The contrast is given in verse 6.

John speaks of the legitimate authority he and other apostles rightfully enjoyed.

Here we have John's second test of a true teacher. **They will recognize the authority of the apostles** which now finds its place not in church tradition but in the completed word of God.

Those who know God will give attention then to God's truth.

Those who do not know God will reject God's truth and the legitimate authority of those who possess such.

This is how we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

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<sup>6</sup> Yarbrough, 227.



## CONCLUSION

I don't remember where I read this or if it is a fully accurate description, but some have suggested that one negative aspect of our TV-entertainment-dominated culture is that we expect that every problem can be solved in 30-60 minutes.

We have very short attention spans.

And certainly Satan takes advantage of this.

Satan is a defeated foe, but he still works for a long-term strategy, and sadly too many Christians do not want to be part of a long-term battle.

Just look at how the so-called conservative movement has totally abandoned God's truth in key areas in just the past 5 years.

I mentioned several sermons ago the testimony of a faithful servant named Athanasius.

He was born about 296 and lived until the year 373.

Though he served for many years as the Bishop of Alexandria, he lived during very difficult times, days when there was a great battle over the truth of Christ against the Arians.

His enemies called him the "Black Dwarf."<sup>7</sup> The famous phrase associated with his life is *contra mundum*, against the world.

Because he held firmly to orthodox belief as found in Scripture and summarized by the Nicene Creed, Athanasius was exiled five times by four Roman emperors.

These five exiles lasted over 17 years in total.

And the total time from his first exile to his final exile lasted about 30 years.

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<sup>7</sup> Christianity Today, "Athanasius"

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/athanasius.html>

Additionally, there were six other times when Athanasius had to flee the city of Alexandria to escape those trying to kill him.<sup>8</sup>

Standing for truth and testing the spirits will always have a cost.

But this is our calling as God's people knowing that we do not do so in our own strength.

John Calvin wrote:

Hard and fierce conflicts indeed await us, and some continually succeed others; but as by Christ's power we fight and are furnished with God's weapons, we even by fighting and striving become conquerors. As to the main subject of this passage, it is a great consolation, that with whatever wiles Satan may assail us, we shall stand through the power of God.<sup>9</sup>

**He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.**

Don't be naïve. **Test and fight!**

**Prayer**

**Hymn 264**

#### **BENEDICTION: PHILIPPIANS 4:19-20**

And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.  
Now to our God and Father *be* glory forever and ever. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasius\\_of\\_Alexandria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasius_of_Alexandria)

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, s.v. 1 John 4:4.