

THE EPISTLES OF 1, 2, & 3 JOHN
RWANDAN PASTOR'S CONFERENCE
SESSION IV
FAITH IN GOD AND LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER
1 JOHN 4:1-21

In our fourth session we are going to move into the fourth chapter of 1 John. We are going to break this chapter into three segments:

1. John's command to us to test the spirits: 4:1-6.
2. An examination of how our love for our neighbors is an outflow of God's love for us: 4:7-11.
3. We can have great confidence in God's love, therefore fear has no place in our lives: 4:12-21.

TEST THE SPIRITS – 4:1-6

We begin chapter four with a very powerful set of verses, a passage that is both enlightening and encouraging to all believers. John will once again be dealing with conflicting issues. Already he has dealt with the conflict between truth and falsehood (2:18-28); also 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). Now John turns to the conflict between the two spiritual realms.¹ Notice that just as in the previous comparisons; this one too demonstrates that there is no middle ground. Instead there are only two paths: the path of God, and the path of Satan.

Let's dig into the verses:

v.1:

There are several key points in v.1. What are they?

First of all, the opening two phrases make a very clear implication that there are multiple spirits in the world. In some cultures this is not really that difficult for people to believe. In America, the notion of spirits in the world is something that many people scoff at. The general society of the West has become very much a culture that believes only what science and hard evidence can demonstrate. As believers, we know that to hold to such a position is to deny the very testimony of Scripture.

The second thing John is pointing out here in v.1 is that we believers are to “*test the spirits*”. **Why does the Apostle command us to test the spirits?**

There is no guessing game here. John clearly identifies why we are to test the spirits: “*to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*” John is clear, not all spirits in the world are godly. Some are of Satan and preach false doctrine to the world. Once again John uses very clear language when he tells them to test the spirits. The English version I use (English Standard Version), is weak in the translation of this phrase because it simply says “*test the spirits*”. In the actual Greek language John used a verb that is best translated very emphatically, and in the second person. Thus would be better translated “***you TEST the spirits!***”

John knew that his readers had been confronted by false teachers in their churches. Jesus had prepared his disciples in Matthew 7 for the inevitable arrival of false teachers. John’s advice here follows quite closely to the counsel of Jesus on this very subject.

v.2-3:

Having provided the command to test the spirits, John now turns to the proof or outcome of the tests and what that will inform the believers to. In the opening phrase of v.2 John overtly establishes that there is a standard by which all spirits can be known. Then in the second phrase of v.2 and the entirety of v.3 that standard is made very clear. First of all, any spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is a godly spirit. Recall that when we examined the background for 1 John in Session I, we said that the churches to whom John was writing had fallen prey to false teachers that denied the incarnation of Jesus. These people were likely a very early form of the heresy of Gnosticism. This verse and v.3 are one of the key indicators we have to that fact. John singles out those who deny the incarnation. He does so by first contrasting them to those who proclaim that Jesus came in the flesh. Then he turns to v.3 where he contrasts these godly spirits to those who do not confess Jesus.

By way of review, why did we say that this Gnostic type heresy was so dangerous to the church?

It is simply not possible to hold to biblical view of salvation without first acknowledging the incarnation of the divine Son of God!!

v.4:

Tell me what you think the purpose of v.4 is??

Notice the affectionate tone John takes, once again, with his readers. John is encouraging and comforting the believers. He has just told them that there are evil spirits in the world at this very moment. By his description of the tests on the spirits, they likely know that they are in the presence of evil spirits within their midst. This can be a very frightening experience for any believer. John needs to take a minute and encourage them.

Once again, my English translation does not fully communicate the strength of this statement. My version reads: “*Little children, you are from God,*”. When you translate the actual words and force of the words that John uses here, it should read more like: “*Little children, you, YOU ARE from God!!!*” Secondly, in this verse we once again see John use the perfect tense for the verb “*overcome*”. **What did we say the perfect tense indicated to us??**

Recall this refers to an act that has already occurred, but one in which the impact of the action carries forward into the present. So John is telling them that not only has their faith in Christ “*overcome*” the evil spirits. This action carries forward in that they continue to “*overcome them*” in the present!!

Finally, John points to the greatest comfort here, the fact that the reason we have overcome is because of our faith in Christ. In the verse we cannot be for certain if John is referencing Christ or God as the one who abides within the believer. However, this distinction is not necessary. The fact is that when we come to Christ in faith, we abide in Him, and He in us, and any member of the Trinity is greater than Satan or any of his false teachers!²

v.5-6:

Once again we see the John’s contrasting style in the “*they*” and “*we*” of v.5 and 6.

Tell me some things that strike you about these two verses.

John's message here is very straight-forward. There is a saying in my country that goes like this: "*Birds of a feather flock together.*" What this means is that generally speaking, people tend to congregate with people who are most like them. John's message here is that the same is true in the spiritual sense. Non-Christians typically scoff at the words of Christians. Christians will be known by their resistance to listen to the teachings of false teachers. We know there are times when non-Christians listen to the word of God. Each of us are a testimony to that, for there was a time when we were each of the world, not of God. But John's message here is not about evangelism. His focus here is about how to test the spirits and not falling prey to false teachers.

GOD'S LOVE EVOKES HUMAN LOVE – 4:7-11

v.7-8:

What is the central theme John is trying to communicate in this passage?

This is the third time that the Apostle has appealed to the subject of brotherly love. The first was 2:7-11, then 3:11-18, now he does so for the third and final time in this letter.³ Once again we see the contrasting style of the positive presentation in v.7, and the negative in v.8. Additionally, his pastoral style is ever-present in how he refers to them as "*beloved*". Just as in 3:9 John makes it clear that the love believers exhibit toward others finds its origin in God: "*love is from God*" as he says here in 4:7.

Who are we to love??

Notice that John is very clear in that we are to "love one another". This is a reference to believers loving believers. **What does this say about believers loving non-believers??**

Notice that there is nothing in the verses that makes this exclusive to Christians only. In fact v.7b and v.8 simply refer to believers manifesting a lifestyle of love. Additionally, look at how Jesus responded to the lawyer in Luke 10:25-37 when asked about showing love. Recall that the man asked about inheriting eternal life. Jesus turned the question back to him. The man correctly responded with the two greatest commandments, the latter being to "*love*" your neighbor as yourself. Jesus affirmed the man's response. But the lawyer pressed him further asking, "*who is my neighbor*". Effectively, this man wanted to know just "who" and "who not" he was required to love. Jesus launches into the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the end, the most despicable person (from a Jewish perspective) was the one to demonstrate the correct form of love. So we know that our message here in 1 John is consistent with that. Yes, we are to love

our fellow Christians,,, but we are equally called to love non-Christians, *just as God first loved us when we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).*

v.9-11:

What is the supreme example of love originating in God??

The Apostle is clearly driving the point of v.8 home. God is the very source and origin of all love. Nothing makes this more evident than the incarnation of Christ and his actions on the cross!! The language here is very similar to that of John 1:14, and 3:16. God's love for man is so strong that even the Creator God of the universe (the Son of God) was willing to step out of heaven and come to this earth so that we might live!!

Such a love, this world has never seen before. There is no higher expression of love than that of Jesus coming to this world and dying on the cross for the sins of man. I want us to all think on this for a moment. God's very nature is to exist. This is why He is called the Great I AM. There has never been a time when God did not exist. The very concept of God dying is simply not feasible. Jesus is fully man, and fully God. Yet during his incarnation, he willingly gave up his human life for us!! He was the propitiation for our sins. We have already discussed this term. **For review: What does it mean??**

Propitiation differs from expiation or mere "dismissing" of sin. Recall our discussions that God's supreme nature of love stands alongside his supreme nature of justice. Before sin entered into the world (Genesis 2), God prescribed the penalty for sin. His just nature demands that sin be atoned. His love nature knew that only Jesus (God himself) could properly make this atonement. Thus Jesus had to die for our sins.

The final verse of this segment serves to summarize John's message which began in v.7. God has demonstrated such a great love for us, so we also should love those around us, particularly our fellow believers.

CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S LOVE – 4:12-21

v.12-13:

John is about to transition into the concept of assurance. Before he does so, he uses v.12 to link what he has just said regarding "love" to the concept of "assurance". He begins by stating the obvious, no human has seen God. The natural question from that would be this: **"If no**

one has ever seen God, how can we have any confidence (or assurance) of our personal status with Him?”

It is a fair question. Yet it is a question to which there is a definite answer. John reminds his readers of his previous conversation with them in 2:10. The one, who truly loves, is one who abides in God and God in him. God is the source of love. Man will never have true godly love apart from God. Not stopping here, John goes on to make sure his readers know that this love is also “*perfected*” in them by the relationship we share with God. This “*perfecting*” is once again presented in the perfect tense to demonstrate its ongoing nature!!

Read v.12 again and think of love as a triangle. A triangle has three sides to it. God’s love for me and His love for my fellow believers make up two sides of the triangle. Our love for each other completes the formation.⁴

The crucial verse here is v.13. John makes it clear that believers have the assurance of knowing their relationship with God because He has placed His Spirit in us. The Holy Spirit testifies to each of us regarding our spiritual condition.

Tell me how we know that the Holy Spirit is speaking to us??

We can each think of times in our lives when we were not walking with God the way we should. We are human, and even though we may be saved, we still sin. When I sin, I feel the tug of the Spirit on my heart. God clearly tells me: “*Steve, this is not what I want for you!! This is not how I intend for you to live your life. Correct this sin.*” We all have similar examples. This is the witness of the Holy Spirit in our lives, correcting us when we are wrong, and affirming us when we are walking godly. This is exactly what John is saying that we have for assurance. We have the very Holy Spirit of God speaking to each of us. So many times I’ve heard great preachers expound: “*If you can’t hear the Holy Spirit speaking to you in your daily walk, you might need to examine your conversion!!*”

v.14-15:

For the third time in this letter, John makes a reference to “*God sending His Son,,,*”. **In this instance there is something unique in the verse. What do you see that it might be??**

Notice that John uses the word “*we*” in relation to witnessing and testifying about Jesus. Once again, the English translation is lacking. In English we use the tone of our voice to reflect emphasis. In Greek, emphasis can be added simply by the type of word used. John uses a very emphatic form of “*we*” here to stress his personal, apostolic witness to the Lord. John is saying, “*WE have seen, and testify,,,!!!!*”

Remember, John is fighting against false teachers that denied the true incarnation and the actual, literal crucifixion of Jesus. John was there!!! He personally witnessed Jesus in the flesh. He was personally at the crucifixion. He is crying out to the people saying in essence: “*Don’t believe these false teachers, because I was there personally and what I am telling you is exactly what I saw!!!*”

v.16-18:

These verses demonstrate John’s core message of assurance and confidence. **Read these verses to yourself and tell me the core of what he is saying here.**

In these three verses the Apostle is uses the perfect tense 4 times!! Remember what we said about this: The perfect tense conveys an action that has occurred in the past, but whose results or consequences carry forward to the present. In v.16 John employs two of these words: “*we have come to know*” and “*and to believe*”. Basically, what John is saying is that with regard to the love God has for us, we have come to know and to believe, that God is love and that whoever abides in love, abides in God and vice versa. He is saying it using terms that mean not only did we come to know and believe this earlier,, but we still know and believe it to this moment!! Notice also that the knowledge precedes the belief. This is natural. We always come to some level of knowledge before we come to any level of faith.

Then moving to v.17 John very plainly says (again using the perfect tense action word) that by this, knowledge and faith, our love is perfected. It is a love manifests itself not only in a lifestyle as we have discussed earlier, but also one that produces confidence in our position with God.

Finally, in v.18 John once again affirms his readers. They are not to succumb to fear or anxiety upon hearing the message of the false teachers. God is the One who perfects (the fourth

perfect tense word) our love. God is the One who provides us with the confidence and assurance of our relationship with Him, therefore fear has no place in the believer's life.

v.19-21:

We are not going to dwell on v.19-21. John is closing out this unit of his discussion on the believer's confidence. The style he uses in this closing is quite familiar to us by this time. He begins in v.19 by again noting that the origin of love is God. V.20 is perhaps the key verse here. A lifestyle which manifests the love of God should be the hallmark of every believer. John highlights the self-deception of the person who claims to love God verbally, but in action hates his brother. He has given this message earlier, but this time he does so with a very common sense analogy: How can one claim to love a God he has never seen, when he hates the very brother he sees every day??

ENDNOTES

¹ Daniel L. Akin. *The New American Commentary: vol. 38 1,2,3 John*. Edited by Richard R. Melick Jr., Paige Patterson, Curtis Vaughan. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2001. 170.

² Samuel Ngewa. *African Bible Commentary*. Edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2006. 1560.

³ Akin. 176-77.

⁴ Ngewa. 1561.