

Series: John's Letters

Title: Staying Grounded in God's Truth

Text: 1 John 4:1-6

Date: May 23, 2021

Verse 1

In 1 John 4:1, John deepened his conversation concerning the false teachers in Asia Minor. He said, "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" (1 John 4:1). The words rendered "do not believe" contained an imperative in the original language of the text. They could have been translated "stop believing."¹ The apostle wanted his readers to stop an action in progress.²

Apparently John had heard that some of his readers were being duped. He knew some were buying into Gnostic teaching and he wanted them to repent. Not all Christian teaching is indeed Christian. Such was the case in John's day, and it remains the case in our day. Considering the ever-present temptation to the theological error, it is important for believers to stay on guard. Too many believers "fall easy victims to the latest fads in spiritual humbuggery."³ Discernment and vigilance are the needs of the hour.

To awaken his readers to their senses, John attempted to show that the deception of Asia Minor was not of mere human origin. It was the result of spiritual warfare. Demonic deception lurked beneath the surface of the Gnostic heresy. It is for this reason that the apostle said, "do not believe every spirit." The word "spirit" referred to an immaterial being, whether the Spirit of the Lord (James 4:5), the spirit of man (1 Corinthians 2:11), an angel (Hebrews 1:7 and 14), a demon (1 Timothy 4:1), Satan (Ephesians 2:2), or Antichrist (Revelation 13:15).

The term translated "spirit" was dearly beloved by the Gnostics. They liked to speak about the spiritual realm. In their system of thought, the physical realm was dirty and worthless. It was inferior to the spiritual realm. Consequently, the Gnostics were known to place high value on "spirits." John wanted his readers to know there was a problem with a certain spirit in Asia Minor. He used the Gnostics own words to reveal that it was the spirit of antichrist was deceiving his readers. He would later indicate that there are really only two types of spiritual teaching — that which comes from the Spirit of God (1 John 4:2) and that which comes from the spirit of the evil one (1 John 4:3). The Christians of Asia Minor needed to be discerning.

According to Scripture, there is an invisible spiritual world that works tirelessly to deceive humanity (2 Corinthians 4:4 and Ephesians 6:12). All deception started with Satan at the beginning of time. He confronted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and spread lies designed to confuse them in regard to God's truth (Genesis 3:1). Since that first encounter, he has only amped up his attempts at deceiving men and women. He employs various "spirits" to achieve his goals (Daniel 10:13-14 and Ephesians 2:1-2). Most false teaching is of demonic origin. Examples from the history of Israel give witness to such realities (Deuteronomy 13:1-15 and 1 Kings 22:19-20). In his writings, Paul would confirm that demonic spirits often drive false teaching in the church (1 Corinthians 12:10 and 2 Corinthians 11:4).

Because there is a Satanic war raging for the hearts and minds of humanity, believers should remain vigilant. Jesus said, "Be on your guard against false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves" (Matthew 7:15). Being aware of Jesus' admonition, John encouraged his readers to "test the spirits to see if they are from God." How could they perform such a test? Their best approach would have been to compare each

¹ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 597.

³ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

teaching they heard with the Word of God. One has said they were to “put them to the acid test of truth.”⁴ When Christians are exposed to teaching that goes against the grain of the truth outlined in God’s Spirit-breathed book (2 Timothy 3:16), they should dismiss it as being of a spirit other than the Holy Spirit.

Verse 2

In verse 2, John said, “This is how you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (1 John 4:2). His intent was to give his readers a sure-fire test for detecting demonic teaching. The Gnostic heretics denied Jesus appeared in the flesh. Their religious system couldn’t allow for such a thing. Since they regarded human flesh as evil, they believed Jesus was a mere spiritual being. By deemphasizing our Lord’s humanity, the gnostics made provision for their own sinful behavior. Since the flesh wasn’t important, sexual immorality was permissible.

If the real believers at Asia Minor wanted to know how to quickly spot who was a heretic, they only need to ask one question. If one was unwilling to confess that Jesus came “in the flesh from God,” he or she was not a true believer.

The fleshly nature of Jesus was important. Not only did it provide a rebuttal to the Gnostics’ loophole for sensual living, but it also formed the fundamental basis of Christian salvation. When He came to Earth, Jesus appeared as 100% God and 100% man. Both parts of His nature were necessary for Him to provide redemption. If He had not come in human form, He would not have been able to provide redemption for humans (1 Peter 2:24). It was necessary for a sinless fleshly being to be sacrificed on behalf of sinful fleshly beings.

It is for the aforementioned reasons that John often spoke against the Gnostics’ denial of Jesus’ fleshly nature (1 John 1:1 and 2 John 7). In our current verse, he used a perfect tense verb translated “has come” to speak of the incarnation. His intent was to depict Jesus’ coming in the flesh as a well-known event that had lasting effects.⁵ Those who affirmed the incarnation were real believers. Those who didn’t were not.

Verse 3

In verse 3, John stated the inverse of his argument from verse 2. He said, “but every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming; even now it is already in the world” (1 John 4:3). The incarnation was a cardinal tenet of the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15:2 and Hebrews 10:9-10). Those who denied the doctrine were under the control of “the spirit of the antichrist.” They were “against Christ.”

John had previously warned against such anti-Christian teaching in 1 John 2:18-22. In our current verse, he reminded his readers they had “heard” that such teaching would come. Most likely, John intended to reference the teaching of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles. Most first-century believers knew that Daniel had foretold one who would oppose the Lord’s Anointed One through deceptive teachings (Daniel 8:25). Jesus built upon the teaching of the prophets. By the time of John’s writing, it was perhaps well known that our Lord had warned of the emergence of false teaching. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus had said, “For false messiahs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Matthew 24:24). The early church likely lived with an awareness that anti-christian personalities would plague the church at some point. It is for this reason Paul warned, “Evil people and impostors will become worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Timothy 3:13).

To their own shame, many of John’s readers had forgotten basic Bible truth concerning false teaching. They had not remained vigilant concerning the coming of anti-Christian

⁴ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 597.

doctrine. One has said that the prophecies of Daniel and Jesus “had found fulfillment before the church had looked for it.”⁶ The true believers in Asia Minor needed to remember God’s Word and maintain a spirit of watchfulness.

Verse 4

John shifted gears in verse 4. He transitioned from talking about the satanic origin of the Gnostic heresy to encouraging true believers regarding their standing in Christ. He said, “You are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). The phrase “You are from God” could literally be rendered “You are out of God.” Once again, John wanted to remind his readers of their identity in Christ (1 John 3:1). The verbiage of the text depicted a continual state of existence. Though the Gnostics maligned them, the true believers could be assured they had a real relationship with God through Christ.

Because of their standing, the Christians of Asia Minor didn’t need to back down to the heretics. They did not need to feel insecure about their spiritual state. In fact, John described them as having “conquered” their opponents. The word translated “overcome” was the Greek word from which the shoe company “Nike” derives its name. In the ancient world, it was used of a conqueror or of one who won a competition. John implemented the verb in the perfect tense. His intent was to convey a past action that had continual results. Through Jesus, the genuine converts of Asia Minor had won a decisive victory over Satan, sin, death, and deception (John 12:31 and 16:33). They did not need to fear the lies of their enemies.

In case his readers needed assurance, they only needed to look within. When they were born again, the Holy Spirit came to live within their souls. With the Spirit, believers received power and wisdom for Christian living. They didn’t need to listen to the lies of the Gnostics. By trusting in the Spirit, they could discover real spiritual knowledge (1 John 2:20 and 27). The One who was in them was greater than the lies of the world. They could receive real guidance and insight from Him (John 16:12-15).

Verse 5

After reminding the true Christians in Asia Minor of their standing before the Lord, John described the condition of their opponents. He said, “They are from the world. Therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them” (1 John 4:5). It should have been no wonder the Gnostics were hostile. They belonged to Satan’s world system. Because they were of the world, what they said came from the world. Their teaching was in alignment with the fallen practices outlined by John in 1John 2:16. It promoted the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

Because they were of the world, the Gnostics always had an audience. Others who were of the world were ready to listen to them. The true Christians didn’t need to be discouraged by the popularity of the false teachers. Worldly people usually like worldly teaching. One has rightly said, “It is always true that satanically inspired thought has a special appeal to worldly minds.”⁷

Verse 6

While people of the world would go on listening to people of the world, the people of the Lord would listen to the people of the Lord. John said, “We are from God. Anyone who knows God listens to us; anyone who is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception” (1 John 4:6). In the original language, John placed emphasis on the word “we.” He had reminded his readers of their identity in Christ at other points in his letter (1 John 3:1 and 4:4). He did so again in verse 6. He knew many were

⁶ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

⁷ Walvoord and Zuck, 898.

feeling insecure because of the false teaching in Asia Minor. The Gnostics were gaining popularity and many of the true believers were being shunned.

John assured the true Christians that, though many rejected them, some would listen. Those who did listen would give evidence they were of God. The opposite was also true. The refusal of some to listen would reveal they weren't true Christians. John's words seem to have been an encapsulation of Jesus' words to Jews in John 8:47 — "The one who is from God listens to God's words. This is why you don't listen, because you are not from God." In the end, John provided a litmus test for his readers to determine who really knew Christ. Those who listened to the teaching of the true believers were true believers. Those who didn't were not. One has summarized the point of John's teaching in verse 6 saying, "People will gravitate to and have an affinity for that confession and teaching with which they are like minded. Therefore one who affirms the world's message is from the world, and, likewise, one who affirms the message that Christ came in the flesh is of God."⁸

⁸ Akin, [CD-Rom].