



## FELLOWSHIP IN TRUTH - 1 JOHN 4

### INTRODUCTION

When studying Scripture, it is always important to keep in mind the author's purpose for writing. The original recipients of I John were Christians who were being plagued by false teachers, causing doubt and confusion for many in the church. To combat the lies which had been spread, John wrote to remind his beloved *little children* (1 John 2:1, 12, 18, 28; 3:7, 18) of the truth of the gospel which they had received and to exhort them to continue steadfastly in the truth they had been taught. He called them, above all, to a fellowship based on walking in the light of God, abiding in Jesus Christ the Son of God, and loving one another with Christ-like love. This was the truth which must abide in them. However, the false teachers also claimed to have the truth. John's readers needed to learn to discern truth from error so they might fellowship in the truth. Keep in mind that you and I are also John's readers, and his message is applicable to us today just as it was to the original first century readers.

In chapter four, John explains how to discern the truth and how to live by the truth. The truth is based on the historical fact of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Fellowship in the truth depends upon one's confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God sent by His Father to make atonement for sin. John further explains that God sent His Son as the manifestation of His love toward us. We have experienced the amazing love of God in what He has done through His Son. Should we not then be constrained to love one another? John writes that those who live by the truth will surely love one another.

### OUTLINE OF 1 JOHN 4

- I. Discern the Truth - 1 John 4:1-10
- II. Demonstrate the Truth - 1 John 4:11-12
- III. Depend on the Truth - 1 John 4:13-21

#### I. Discern the Truth - I John 4:1-10

The church has been threatened by false teachers since the very beginning. Jesus warned that they would come (Matthew 7:15, 24:24; Mark 13:22). The apostle Paul warned against *false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ* (2 Corinthians 11:13), and against those who *distort the gospel of Christ* (Galatians 1:7 NASB). The apostle Peter warned against *false prophets and teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies* (2 Peter 2:1). The book of Revelation attests to the existence of

false apostles who tried to deceive believers (Revelation 2:2). In this passage of his letter, John reveals how a believer is to discern between the true and the false. The truth is always based on the confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. Any teaching which denies this is inspired by the spirit of the antichrist and not by the Spirit of God. Thus, there are two opposing spirits, the spirit of truth which is the Spirit of God and the spirit of error which is the spirit of the antichrist. (For further explanation of antichrist see Lesson 3.)

#### A. Test the Spirits - 1 John 4:1-3

John says, Do not believe every spirit. Today we would say, "Don't believe everything you hear or read." Everything must be put to the test to determine whether it is truly from God or not. Christians need to be discerning of what they read and to whom they listen. Every Christian must be alert to recognize the spirit behind the words because there is a danger of deception by false teachers. Are the words inspired by the Spirit of God or by the spirit of the antichrist? The criteria John used as the test is one's attitude toward Jesus Christ.

#### 1. Spirit of God - 4:2

Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God. This is the basis upon which all Christian truth is built — that Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God came to earth as a flesh and blood human being. *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:14). ...*Concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh* (Romans 1:3). *But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law* (Galatians 4:4). *Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same* (Hebrews 2:14).

I. Howard Marshall in The Epistles of John notes that 'John's test is not an infallible one. Jesus Himself had to protest against people who called Him 'Lord' and yet did not do what He said (Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 6:46). Mere confession with the mouth is not necessarily a guide to the belief of the heart.' It is important to remember that John was most likely warning his readers against the Gnostics who denied the deity of Christ, so his test would certainly be relevant in that particular situation. Marshall notes that today's reader must take into account the whole of John's letter when looking for the characteristics of genuine Christianity. The characteristics which John stresses, besides confession

of Christ, are vital faith, love, and righteousness. All are necessary for a true Christian witness.

## 2. Spirit of the antichrist - 4:3

Every spirit that does not confess Jesus as God in the flesh is not from God and is therefore the spirit of the antichrist. In chapter two, John has already said that many antichrists are in the world and that they are to be categorized as liars because they deny both the Father and the Son. To deny the Son, therefore, is also to deny the Father who sent Him. The spirit of antichrist is not just against Christ but against God as well.

### B. Trust in God - 1 John 4:4-10

#### 1. Overcome Error - 4:4-6

Because we are children of God, we are overcomers through the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said, *In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world* (John 16:33). Jesus has overcome the world, therefore we have overcome the world. The victory is already His, and we can count on that as we abide in Him in reliance upon the Holy Spirit (*He Who is in us* — 1 John 4:4). The Holy Spirit of God is greater than he who is in the world, an obvious reference to satan. Jesus called satan *the ruler of this world* (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), and Paul referred to him as *the god of this age* (2 Corinthians 4:4). In 1 John 5:19 John states, *The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one*. What a comfort and encouragement it is to know that victory is always ours in Christ. (See 2 Corinthians 2:14 and Colossians 2:15.)

False teachers are of the world. Consequently, they speak from the viewpoint of the world and those with worldly minds listen to them. They live, speak, and are received in a realm which is controlled by satan, the ruler of this world. Christians are of God and therefore do not listen to the false teachers. Who do they listen to? John says that they listen to *us*. As an apostle of Jesus Christ, John had heard the gospel directly from Jesus. Jesus' message was the truth which John and all the apostles taught. In the first century, believers were to listen to the teaching of Jesus as passed on to the apostles. Today, we also listen to the teaching of the apostles as it has been handed down to us in the Bible, specifically in the gospels and the epistles of the New Testament.

We can know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. Whatever is taught in the Bible is the spirit of truth. The way to guard oneself from the spirit of error is to hear and heed the spirit of truth as it is found in God's word. This is best done through regular Bible reading and study and memorization of Scripture. What a great gift God has given us in His word of truth, the Holy

Bible. Immerse your heart and mind in the truth so that you may stand firm in the face of false teaching. Do not allow yourself to be misled. Reliance upon God and His word is the secret of victory.

#### 2. God is love - 4:7-10

In the previous verses, John expounded the importance of discerning the truth and believing in Jesus, the crucial element of the spirit of truth. He now ties truth and love together, stating that Jesus is the manifestation of truth through God's love.

##### a. Love is from Him - 4:7-8

All love comes from God because He is love. He is the beginning of love, the essence of love, love poured out toward us, and love in completeness. Therefore, it follows that those who love have been born of God and know God. The reverse is also true — those who do not love, do not know God. The inference is that the experience of God's love, through knowing Him and fellowshiping with Him will produce love in a person's life. How is this true in your own life? Do others know you are a Christian by your love?

##### b. Greatest love was shown by Him - 4:9-10

The demonstration of God's love is seen clearly in the coming of Jesus. God's sending His only begotten Son into the world to give us eternal life is definitely the supreme expression of love. God did not send His Son because of any love that had been shown on our part. Humankind are essentially sinners, not lovers! Love began with God. Paul's letter to the Ephesians states that God loved us when we were dead in our trespasses and sins. He loved us so much that He raised us up and gave us life in Jesus Christ. In Romans 5:8 Paul wrote, *God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*. In his gospel, John said it this way, *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life* (John 3:16). Have you partaken of the greatest love by believing and receiving God's Son Jesus Christ as your savior from sin? If not, will you do so today by acknowledging your sin, turning away from your sinful way of life in humble repentance, and relying upon Christ for full salvation?

God has shown what true love is by pardoning our sins and paying the price Himself by sending His only Son to be the propitiation (atoning sacrifice) for our sins. "To say 'God is love' is exactly the same as to say, 'God has in His Son made atonement for the sin of the world'" (J. Denney, [The Death of Christ](#)).

**II. Demonstrate the Truth - 1 John 4:11-12**

True believers, those who know God and are continuing to grow in knowledge of Him through the spirit of truth, will demonstrate the truth in their lives by loving one another. John explains why this is so.

**A. Love One Another - 1 John 4:11**

Anyone who has experienced God's sacrificial love, so full of grace and mercy, must love others in return. God's love is designed to flow from Him to us through Jesus Christ and then on through us to others through the power of the Holy Spirit.

John has expressed a profound and wonderful concept in chapter four. Love and truth are one and the same. The truth is that Jesus Christ is God's Son who has come in the flesh (1 John 4:2). Love is God having sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world (1 John 4:9-10). Love is truth manifested. It is only natural then that one who confesses the truth must surely display love in his or her life. John's call to believers is to demonstrate the truth, which is love, in our lives.

**B. See God Through Love - 1 John 4:12**

No one has ever seen God. In John 1:18, John wrote, *No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.* God has been revealed to us through the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the truth of God and the love of God. He brought God's message of truth into the world (John 1:14; John 14:16-17) and showed us God's love by laying down His life for us (1 John 3:16). In a very real sense, we have seen God through Jesus, but no one has ever seen God face to face. In fact, in Old Testament times, it was believed that if anyone saw God face to face, they would surely die. In Exodus 33:20, when Moses asked God to show him His glory, God responded *You cannot see my face, for no man can see Me and live!* (See also Genesis 32:30; Deuteronomy 5:26; Judges 6:22, 13:22.)

Today we can see a glimpse of what God is like through the love we show to one another. When we love one another we can be assured that the life of God abides in us and that His love has found consummation in us. When we love one another, God's love has done what it was designed to do — it has manifested His love in us. The result is that others see what God is like through the love which is shown to them. This love is indispensable to a fellowship which is based upon true knowledge of God. It is the evidence of truth in one's life. How are others drawn to the truth through the witness of love in your life?

**III. Depend on the Truth - 1 John 4:13-21**

Not only is the truth something which must be demonstrated in the lives of all Christians, it is also something which can be depended upon, giving confidence, boldness, fearlessness, and proof of one's profession.

**A. You Can Know God Indwells You - 1 John 4:13-16**

In verse 12, John stated that as believers our love for one another is evidence that God abides in us. Now he goes further to say that we can know that God abides in us and that we abide in Him through the Holy Spirit which He has given us. We can have confidence in our relationship with God, a relationship of mutual abiding and true fellowship, because God's Holy Spirit indwells us, urging us and enabling us in our obedience to Him and conformity to His will.

Confidence in this relationship is further strengthened by our confession that Jesus is the Son of God. John and the other apostles had witnessed with their own eyes and testified and taught that God the Father had sent Jesus as Savior of the world (1 John 4:13). Because they were eyewitnesses, they absolutely knew and believed the love of God (1 John 4:16). Believers can have that same confidence because the Holy Spirit which indwells us is also a witness (Acts 5:30-32). We have the witness inside of us! That witness permits us to say, *We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world* (1 John 4:14). Our belief in the magnificent truth of God's love then leads us to abide in that love in fellowship with God.

**B. You Can Be Bold in the Day of Judgment - 1 John 4:17**

Truth manifested in our lives, which is love, can even give boldness at the judgment seat of Christ when He returns. The Bible teaches that God is a just Judge (Genesis 18:25) and that those who live in the love of God should look forward with eager anticipation to the day of judgment (Jude 14-21). We have the ability to do that because God's manifested love in our lives makes us like Jesus. When we walk in love, we *walk just as He walked* (1 John 2:6).

**C. You Can Be Fearless - 1 John 4:18**

Where there is love, there is no fear. Love *perfected in us* (1 John 4:12) casts out fear. If a believer looks to the day of judgment with fear, it must be because God's love has not been perfected (reached completeness) in him. When God's love finds its consummation in a life through the outpouring of His love for others, then fear

is driven out from the heart. As God's love is exercised and perfected in a believer's life, fear is replaced with boldness.

In contrast, lack of love leads to fear and *fear involves torment*. (NASB uses the word punishment instead of torment.) Zane Hodges, in his commentary on 1 John writes, "Fear carries with it a kind of torment that is its own punishment.....an unloving believer experiences punishment precisely because he feels guilty and is afraid to meet his Judge." (The Bible Knowledge Commentary)

#### D. You Love God - 1 John 4:19

In 1 John 4:10, John wrote that the essence of love is not that we loved God but that He loved us. Now he writes that we love because God first loved us. Believers have seen and experienced the love of God, and the result is not only loving others but also loving God in return. The more we understand of God's great love for us, the more we are compelled to love Him in return. Should we not then be diligent in the study of God's word and in prayer so that we might know Him better and love Him more!

#### E. You Prove the Reality of Your Profession - 1 John 4:20-21

As Christians show forth the truth in their lives by loving one another, their confession of Jesus Christ comes to life.

#### 1. By loving others

If someone claims to love God but hates his brother, *he is a liar*. It is hypocritical to claim love for the unseen God and not show love for those whom we can see. How can a Christian claim to love God and not respond with love to the needs and hurts of those around him? Love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is a sign (both to ourselves and to others) that we love God.

#### 2. By keeping His commandment

Love for others is not just a sign of loving God. Love for others is a commandment (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43-44 and 22:37-39). Those who love keep His commandments. When we keep God's commandment to love others, we have confidence that our faith is real and we enjoy fellowship in truth with God and other believers.

#### **Applications**

1. Do you feel confident in your ability to discern the spirit of truth from the spirit of error? What criteria would you use?
2. Who needs your love this week? How will you show God's love to those people?
3. Will you show your love for God by spending time daily reading and studying the truth in His word?
4. Do you look forward to the day of judgment with confidence or with fear? What does that tell you about yourself? Will you help yourself grow in confidence by obeying God's command to love?