

Testing the Spirits of False Teachers

1 John 4:1-6

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(1 John 4:1-6) Introduction: this is a critical passage of Scripture. It deals with true and false teachers, in particular with the spirit of truth or error that fills their hearts. This is a test of our love for God. How do we know that we really love God? We can tell by the spirits of the teachers we are following. If we are following the spirit of a true teacher, then it is clear indication that we love God. If we are following the spirit of a false teacher, then it is clear indication that we do not love God. We must test the spirits of teaching throughout the world.

1. Test the spirits of teachers (v.1).

2. Test the confession of teachers (v.2-3).

3. Test yourselves (v.4).

4. Test the followers of teachers (v.5-6).

1. (1 John 4:1) Teaching, False— Evil Spirits: first, test the spirits of teachers; test them to make sure they are of God. This is a strong charge given to believers. Note the word *beloved*. This was John's tender address to the believers of the church. He is definitely addressing believers, and this tells us a significant fact: believers can be misled by the *spirits of false teachers*. What kinds of spirits dwell within a false teacher?

⇒ A false teacher may have a *spirit of light*, especially in industrialized societies. The spirit presents a way of life that seems to be the truth, the very way to live. He presents a way of life that seems to be intelligent and full of knowledge and enlightenment. His way seems to be the way to go, the way that leads to...

- the good life
- progress
- development
- assurance
- satisfaction
- fulfillment
- education
- good feelings
- pleasure
- possessions
- recognition

⇒ A false teacher may have a *spirit of righteousness*. He may preach and teach righteousness, a righteousness that stresses...

- morality
- goodness
- justice
- giving
- serving
- education
- development
- ministry
- helping

⇒ A false teacher may stress *the life and teachings of Jesus Christ*—all the good qualities of life—all the traits that should characterize people. They may tell people to copy the life of Jesus and to focus their hearts upon the good qualities of life, and if they do, God will accept them.

False teachers make one fatal mistake. This is discussed in the next note. The point in this verse is that we must test the spirits of false teachers, test them to make absolutely sure they are of God. Note one other fact: there are "*many false prophets*." Scripture is not talking about a few, but many. If there were many in the days of John, think how many more there are today. Think how many more religions there are; how many cults have sprung up around Christianity; how many denominations and ministries have sprung up since John wrote these words. Just think of all the churches and pulpits and podiums that are being filled by the teachers of the world. In addition, think how many preachers and teachers claim to be true followers of Christ. There are many, thousands and thousands, of false teachers in the world today. Who are they? This is the discussion of this passage. This is what every person must test in order to keep from being misled.

"For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple" ([Romans 16:18](#)).

"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works" ([2 Cor. 11:13-15](#)).

"I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" ([Galatians 1:6-9](#)).

"But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" ([2 Tim. 3:13](#)).

[2. \(1 John 4:2-3\) Teachers— Teachers, False: second, test the confession of teachers.](#) What is it that makes a teacher true or false? Jesus Christ. What a man believes about Jesus Christ makes the teacher true or false. What a man confesses about Jesus Christ exposes his spirit, a spirit of truth or a spirit of error. And note what it is about Jesus Christ that exposes a teacher: the incarnation. That is, did Jesus Christ come in the flesh or not?

1. The true Spirit, the Spirit of God Himself, confesses that Jesus Christ did come in the flesh, that the incarnation is true. If a teacher has the Spirit of God dwelling in him, then he confesses the incarnation, the wonderful truth that God did become Man and did come to earth to save man. The Spirit of God *cannot confess* anything other than the truth; therefore, every teacher who has the Spirit of God will confess the same truth. He cannot confess anything else because the Spirit of God Himself dwells within him. If he confesses anything else, then the spirit within him is not the Spirit of God. Now note the confession in detail, exactly what it is that a true teacher confesses: "Jesus Christ is come in the flesh."

a. The true teacher confesses *Jesus*. The name *Jesus* means *Savior*. It is believing that Jesus Christ did come from God to save man, to be the Savior of the world.

- b. The true teacher confesses *Christ*. The name *Christ* means *Messiah*, the Anointed One of God. It is believing that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah of Scripture; that He is the fulfillment of all the prophecies of Scripture; that He is the Anointed Savior sent from God to earth.
- c. The true teacher confesses that Jesus Christ is the *Son of God*; that God did send His Son *out of* (ek) heaven, out of the spiritual world and dimension into this world; that God sent His Son in human flesh to save man in fulfillment of Scripture. It means that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Scripture predicting the coming death, resurrection, and exaltation of the Messiah. Simply stated, it means that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came to earth to save man.

Thought 1. This is the confession of the true teacher and of every true believer. We must always remember that a true teacher is indwelt by the Spirit of God Himself. Therefore, the true teacher *will always* confess the incarnation, the wonderful truth that "Jesus Christ is come in the flesh."

"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" ([Isaiah 7:14](#)).

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" ([Isaiah 9:6](#)).

"And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS" ([Luke 1:31](#)).

"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" ([John 1:14](#)).

"For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh" ([Romans 8:3](#)).

"But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" ([Phil. 2:7](#)).

"And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory" ([1 Tim. 3:16](#)).

"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" ([Hebrews 2:14-15](#)).

"Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God" ([1 John 4:2](#)).

"Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven" ([Matthew 10:32](#)).

"Also I say unto you, Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God" ([Luke 12:8](#)).

"And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" ([Phil. 2:11](#)).

"Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: [but] he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also" ([1 John 2:23](#)).

"Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God" ([1 John 4:15](#)).

2. The false spirit denies that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. He denies the incarnation. He does not believe that God took on human flesh and became a man.

- a. The false teacher does not believe that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. He may accept Jesus Christ as a great teacher and a great religious leader, perhaps the greatest, but he does not believe that Jesus Christ is *the Savior*. He believes there are other ways to God, that other people who believe in God will be as acceptable to God as a follower of Jesus Christ.
- b. The false teacher does not believe that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah and Anointed One from God. He does not believe the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God. He accepts them only as the writings of great religious people of the past; therefore, there are no prophetic promises of a Messiah, no promise of a coming Savior. To the false teacher, Jesus Christ is only a great religious teacher, only one way to reach God. He is not *the Anointed One* sent from God to save all men. He is not the only way to God.
- c. The false teacher does not believe Jesus Christ has *come from God*. He does not believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that Jesus Christ came out of heaven, out from the spiritual world and dimension. He does not believe that God sent His Son into the world in human flesh as a man. Again, the false teacher believes that Jesus Christ is only a man just like all other men—a great man, perhaps the greatest, perhaps the man who got closer to God than any other man. Nevertheless, to the false teacher Jesus Christ was only a man who taught us how to worship and serve God. The false teacher would say...
 - that Jesus Christ was not sinless. He lived close to God, but no man can achieve sinlessness.
 - that Jesus Christ died, but not as a substitute for man's sins. He died as a great martyr showing us how we should face death and how we should be willing to die for the great cause of righteousness.
 - that the resurrection of Jesus Christ did not take place. It is only a picture of the spiritual truth that man can live in God's presence.

Now, note the fatal mistake of the false teachers: to deny that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is to deny that man can ever be saved beyond this world. Why? Because man can never know for sure that God exists nor how to reach God if He does exist. No person has ever seen God or heaven, and they never will, not by physical and material technology. The physical world cannot penetrate or cross over into the spiritual world, no matter what some persons may claim. If man is ever to know God and the spiritual world, then God has to come to earth and reveal the truth to us. There is no other way. Therefore, to deny that God sent His Son into the world is to deny that we can ever be saved.

There is another fact that needs to be noted as well, that of perfection. God is perfect and man is imperfect. Therefore, God could never let man penetrate or cross over into perfection. Why? Because man's imperfection would affect the perfect world of God. Heaven would no longer be heaven; it would no longer be perfect if God allowed imperfect beings to enter it. No matter what some people may claim about penetrating heaven, they have not. Imperfection just cannot cross over into perfection. The fatal mistake of false teachers is just that, *fatal*—fatal and eternally dooming. The consequences of denying the incarnation of Jesus Christ are terrible.

If Jesus Christ has not come in the flesh, then it means...

- that God has not loved us enough to reveal Himself to us ([1 John 1:2](#)).
- that God has not loved us enough to send us the Word of life ([1 John 1:1](#)).
- that God has not loved us enough to show us eternal life ([1 John 1:2](#)).
- that there is no eternal life ([1 John 1:2](#)).
- that there is no fellowship with God, not for sure ([1 John 1:3](#)).
- that the messages of hope and of Scripture are not true, not for sure ([1 John 1:3](#)).
- that there is no joy beyond this life, not for sure, no fullness of joy ([1 John 1:4](#)).
- that Jesus Christ is not our Advocate ([1 John 2:2](#)).
- that there is no forgiveness of sin ([1 John 1:9](#); [1 John 2:2](#)).
- that there is no perfect sacrifice for sin ([1 John 2:2](#)).

On and on the list could go, but the point is clearly seen. The false teacher destroys the hope of salvation and of eternity with God. We are left without hope and without God in this world unless God has loved us, loved us so much that He sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world. Jesus Christ is the crux of the message of the gospel. Note that the spirit of the false teacher is the spirit of antichrist (see [1 John 2:18-23](#)). If a teacher confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, he is a true teacher. If not, he is a false teacher who promotes the very spirit of antichrist. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits" ([1 John 4:1](#)).

"But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven" ([Matthew 10:33](#)).

"Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" ([Mark 8:38](#)).

"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily [secretly] shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction....The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished" ([2 Peter 2:1, 9](#)).

"Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son" ([1 John 2:22](#)).

"I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let

him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" ([Galatians 1:6-9](#)).

"Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" ([Matthew 5:19](#)).

"But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" ([Matthew 15:9](#)).

"Desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm" ([1 Tim. 1:7](#)).

"Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron" ([1 Tim. 4:1-2](#)).

"If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness" ([1 Tim. 6:3](#)).

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" ([2 Tim. 4:3-4](#)).

"For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision [legalists]: whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's [personal gain] sake" ([Titus 1:10-11](#)).

"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily [secretly] shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction" ([2 Peter 2:1](#)).

3. [\(1 John 4:4\) Believers: third, test yourselves. How? There are two ways.](#)

1. Ask yourself if you are *of God*; that is, have you been born of God? ([See 1 John 2:29](#))
2. Ask yourself if you are overcoming the spirits of false teachers? The Spirit of God is in you, and He is far greater than the evil spirits of false teachers. He enables you to conquer false teachers. Therefore, if you are following a teacher who denies the incarnation, that the Son of God has come in the flesh, then you are *not of God*. You are not born of God. But if you have rejected the teachings of men who deny the incarnation of Jesus Christ, then you are born of God.

Thought 1. Many false teachers are persuasive. They are very personable, attractive, and appealing—full of charisma. Their ideas and teachings sound reasonable and appealing. But if a person has been truly born of God, he has the Holy Spirit to help him see the error of the teaching. And note the words "you have overcome them." The Spirit of God does not fail. Therefore, if a person is following some strange teaching about Jesus Christ, he is most likely not *born of God*. Those who are truly *born of God* confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has come in the flesh. They confess...

- the incarnation
- the righteousness and sinlessness of Jesus Christ
- the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- the ascension and exaltation of Jesus Christ

"Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you" ([John 14:17](#)).

"But the comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" ([John 14:26](#)).

"Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come" ([John 16:13](#)).

"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" ([Romans 8:9](#)).

"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" ([Romans 8:14](#)).

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual" ([1 Cor. 2:12-13](#)).

"Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" ([1 Cor. 3:16](#)).

"But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him" ([1 John 2:27](#)).

"And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us" ([1 John 3:24](#)).

"Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit" ([1 John 4:13](#)).

4. (1 John 4:5-6) Teachers— Teachers, False: fourth, test the followers of

teachers. We can look at the people who follow teachers and tell whether a teacher is false or not.

1. False teachers are followed by people who are worldly. Note the three things said:
 - a. False teachers are of the world. They have only a natural birth; they have never been born of God, never been spiritually born. The Spirit of God, the divine nature of God, is not dwelling within their hearts.

b. False teachers speak of the world. What does this mean? It means they teach a worldly or human approach to God:

- ⇒ that man reaches God by being good and doing good.
- ⇒ that man becomes acceptable to God by living a religious life and by doing religious things such as being confirmed, baptized, going to church, confessing, and keeping the rituals and ceremonies.
- ⇒ that man secures God's approval by combining his spirit with God's Spirit through communion and through righteous deeds.

Note: such approaches to God center and focus upon man and what he does. They are centered in the world, not in God and what God has done to save man. Man saves himself, not God through His Son Jesus Christ.

c. The world hears false teachers. The message of false teachers appeals to man. For if the Son of God has not come to earth, then there is no absolute and infallible rule to govern man. Therefore, we are somewhat free to find our own way to God the best we can. If we stumble here and there, it will not matter that much. God will understand, for He has left us to find our own way. This teaching, of course, tends...

- to excuse sin
- to exalt man as his own savior
- to stress ego and self-image over the power of God and His Spirit
- to give man the right to gain personal authority and power over others
- to give man the right to focus upon success, position, money, pleasures, and possessions
- to stress man and his inner power [will] over God's power
- to exalt man and his importance over God
- to focus upon the discipline and control of the flesh over the power of God's Spirit

"And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous" ([Luke 18:9](#)).

"Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word" ([John 8:42-43](#)).

"Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God" ([John 8:46-47](#)).

"For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" ([Romans 1:20-22](#); cp. 1 John 4:18-32).

"For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I

will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" ([1 Cor. 1:18-21](#); cp. [1 Cor. 3:19-21](#)).

"And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know" ([1 Cor. 8:2](#)).

"Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" ([1 Cor. 10:12](#)).

"For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself" ([Galatians 6:3](#)).

"Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil" ([Proverbs 3:7](#)).

"Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness: but a faithful man who can find?" ([Proverbs 20:6](#)).

"He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered" ([Proverbs 28:26](#)).

"Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!" ([Isaiah 5:21](#)).

"Therefore hear now this, thou that art given to pleasures, that dwellest carelessly, that sayest in thine heart, I am, and none else beside me; I shall not sit as a widow, neither shall I know the loss of children: but these two things shall come to thee in a moment in one day, the loss of children, and widowhood: they shall come upon thee in their perfection for the multitude of thy sorceries and for the great abundance of thine enchantments. For thou hast trusted in thy wickedness: thou hast said, None seeth me. Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee; and thou hast said in thine heart, I am, and none else beside me" ([Isaiah 47:8-10](#)).

"Ye have plowed wickedness, ye have reaped iniquity; ye have eaten the fruit of lies: because thou didst trust in thy way, in the multitude of thy mighty men" ([Hosea 10:13](#)).

"The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground? though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the LORD" ([Obadiah 3-4](#)).

2. True teachers are followed by people who know God. They know and confess that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come in the flesh. Therefore, they follow the teacher who proclaims...

- the incarnation of God, that is, the virgin birth, that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.
- the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that He did live a sinless life when He was upon earth and thereby secured righteousness for man.

- the death of Jesus Christ, that He died for man's sins, that He was the perfect sacrifice for sin, wholly and perfectly acceptable to God.
- the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that He arose and conquered death for all men and made it possible for man to live a new life, a new life that conquers all the forces of evil and that infuses into man the seed of eternal life.

Note what the verse says: those who *know God* are the followers of the true teacher, but those who *are not of God* do not hear the true teacher. This is the way we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Thought 1. We can tell a true teacher by the people who follow him. Our task is to look at the followers of any teacher. What kind of life do they live—a worldly or righteous life? (See [1 John 2:15-17](#); [1 John 2:29](#); [1 John 3:4-9](#).)

"And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection" ([Luke 8:14](#)).

"Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" ([John 7:16-17](#)).

"Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed" ([John 8:31](#)).

"Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you" ([John 14:17](#)).

"But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me" ([John 15:26](#)).

"Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come" ([John 16:13](#)).

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God: that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" ([1 Cor. 2:12](#)).

"We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error" ([1 John 4:6](#)).