

SESSION 7 – WEEK OF 28 FEB 2021

LIVING IN GOD - IN LOVE AND IN THE SPIRIT

SCRIPTURE: 1JOHN 4:1-13

Theme:

This passage has two main sections. The first exhorts readers to test the spirits, to beware of the spirit of the anti-messiah (anti-christ), and to recognise God's Spirit. The second section reprises the theme of love for one another, which is modelled after the love displayed by the Messiah (Christ).

Key Verse:

"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit." (1John 4:12-13)

Read 1 John 4:1-13

Core Questions for Discussion

(If your group meets fortnightly, combine Core Questions of two sessions and choose one Further Question from either session.)

1. Based on 1 John 4:1-4,
 - a) Why are we to test the spirits?
What should we look out for in testing the spirits?
 - b) What attitude are we to hold toward these antichrist spirits?

- a) We are to test the spirits because many false prophets have gone out into the world (4:1). Today, as in John's time, there are anti-messiahs on the loose whose words confuse and lead Christians away from God.

We are to look out for what the spirits confess about Jesus Christ, in particular, His Incarnation and Him becoming fully God and fully human (4:2-3).

Some notes on the Antichrists

"The word antichrist (antichristos) appears only in the Johannine epistles (1 Jn 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn 7), although the concept occurs elsewhere. [...] The antichrist tradition results from the converging of separate streams of Jewish tradition within early Christian eschatology. [...] One is a nonpolitical, deceptive religious figure from within the community [...] a false prophet who opposes the true prophet and misleads the righteous with signs and wonders (Deut 18:18-22). The second form is a tyrannical ruler from outside the community who oppresses the faithful in the end times. It may be rooted in the Jewish tradition of end-time tyrants."

- Duane F. Watson, "Antichrist," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), 51.

Some notes on the Antichrists (*continued*)

“First, there are “many” antichrists (1Jn 2:18). Second, they are not in the future but have been among, and may have emerged out of the very community (1Jn 2:19, 4:1) [...] This suggests the shocking announcement that while John’s original readers (as many readers today) may have been expecting a larger-than-life evil person to arise, the kind of heretical teaching going around was actually an evil of similar proportion that could also effectively destroy the church.”

- Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2014), 123–124.

“Within the NT four main passages reflect this concept, even though only 1 and 2 John use the actual term ‘antichrist’. The passages are 2 Thess 2:1–12; Matthew 24/Mark 13; 1 and 2 John, and Revelation 12–13. [...] while the antichrists are experienced now as human entities, behind them there is another force making war against God and his people.”

- Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 2000), 99–102.

Do note that 1 John provides just one example of a test of the spirits or of prophets; others are given in 1 Cor 12:3, 1 Cor 14:29–32, Deut 13:1–3, Deut 18:20–22. We should also be mindful that the Bible reminds us not to despise prophecy but to test it (1 Thess 5:19–21).

It is important to note that prophecy is not simply *foretelling* the future, but also about *forthtelling* – speaking forth God’s heart in order to build up, encourage, and console God’s people (1 Cor 14:3).

One might also differentiate between (i) a *false prophet* who

is consistently opposed to Christ (whether openly or covertly), and (ii) a *failed prophecy* where a human prophet makes a genuine mistake. A case study of the latter may be found at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/january-web-only/trump-prophets-apologize-election-prophecies-humility.html>

- b) We are to be fearful in the sense of being alert, cautious, and watchful against the antichrist spirits. This alert watchfulness involves staying close to the true testimony and witness of God and of the Incarnate Jesus, passed on through the apostles, and now encapsulated in the Bible.

At the same time, we are not to be fearful in the sense of being afraid, anxious, or troubled by them. After all, 1 John 4:4 affirms that we “are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world”. So we need not fear! For God is greater, God lives in us through His Spirit (1 John 3:24, 4:13), and in Christ we have overcome.

2. Read 1 John 4:9–11.

- a) What does this text say about the manner in which God’s love is revealed among us?
- b) “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins”. Share with your group how you know this to be true, *both* in your understanding *and* in your experience. Was there a particular incident in your life where this truth became particularly clear or tangible?

- c) How would you explain this verse to (i) a colleague, (ii) a niece or nephew in secondary school, (iii) someone whom you regularly engage with in a sport or hobby?
- a) God's love is revealed when:
- He sent His Son intentionally and not by accident or as an afterthought,
 - He sent His Son publicly ("among us"),
 - He sent His precious and highly-valued Son ("one and only"),
 - He sent His Son into "the world", even though it is a sphere which rejected and hated the truth and the light,
 - He sent His Son as the instrument or channel which gives life ("through him"),
 - He sent His Son to those who did not love Him,
 - He sent His Son as a sacrifice to atone for other people's sins; sins that He did not commit and sins for which He was neither guilty nor liable.
- b) This is an opportunity for individuals to reflect on their personal understanding and experience.
- The group leader or facilitator may want to look out for individuals whose sharings are somewhat lopsided, i.e. those who speak only on either the intellectual or the experiential aspect, while neglecting the other.
 - Gently prompt these individuals to share about the less-articulated side. If they are unable or unwilling to, do not force them and assure them that it is fine. Move on to the next member of the group for now, as the next item may help them consider this question from a slightly different angle. At the close of the session, pray for and with them, asking God to make this truth a reality both in their mind and in their heart.
- c) This is in some ways a restatement of (b), but with consideration for the background of the hearer.
- The group leader or facilitator may ask group members to utilise simpler, non-technical language and avoid Christian jargon.
 - Group members are also encouraged to consider what they have in common with each of these categories, and draw on shared stories, imagery, metaphors, jokes, catchphrases that connect with the hearer.
 - Group members are also encouraged to draw on both intellectual arguments and sharing of their personal experiences.
 - We encourage the group to follow-up this discussion with prayer (see 5(b) below).
3. How would you explain 1 John 4:12 which says, "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us"? Is God's love moving closer toward completion in your life?
- This verse does not mean that we attain sinless perfection through love. Neither does the verse imply that God's love is inadequate and that God needs our help to complete His love.

- Rather, this verse speaks of God's love being fully manifest, realised, and actualised.
- As we saw in the sermon of 31 Jan 2021, the reputed Bible scholar Karen Jobes writes:
 - o "God in Christ has loved us by redeeming us from sin, and *that love has a transformative goal in the life of the believer*, that they should love God [...] which is expressed by love for others. [...] This does not mean that the believer has been perfected and no longer needs to continue to exercise love. Rather, *when a believer loves others, the goal of God's redemptive love in that person's life has been achieved in that behavior.*"
 - Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p.86.
- Thus, God's love has a transformative goal. God's love comes to thorough expression and into true fullness in this way: when we, the recipients of God's gracious love, become transformed by that divine love, and thereby live out His command to love others as God first loved us.
- "Is God's love moving closer toward completion in your life"?
 - o This is an important reflection and application question for the group. It is recommended that a portion of time be allocated for members to reflect on and discuss this question. Group members could also pray with one another (see item 5(a) below).

Further Questions for Discussion

(Optional question for discussion if time permits. Do allocate adequate time for prayer and fellowship.)

If you have time ...

4. 1 John 4:7-8 reads: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." Does this verse mean that all who love others are of God, even if they do not profess Christ as Lord? Does "God is love" mean "love is God"?
 - No. We have seen throughout 1 John an emphasis on the centrality of Jesus Christ, the one who has been seen and touched (1:1-4, 4:2), who is the Advocate and atoning sacrifice (2:1-2, 4:10), who is the way to the Father (2:22-23, cf. Gospel of John 14:6), and in whom we need to place our trust and obedience (3:23).
 - The Bible does not present love simply as an abstract concept or a grand ideal. No, love is not god, but God has shown what love truly means and really looks like, through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Love matters because Jesus has first demonstrated His love for humanity, and Jesus Himself is the exemplar and role model of true love (3:16, 4:11).

Suggestions for Prayer

5. Would you consider praying for:

- a) God to work His grace in yourself and in your fellow group members, that God's love might daily move closer toward its transformative goal and toward completion. Pray that God's love may be fully manifest, realised, and actualised in each of our lives (see item 3 above).

- b) An opportunity to talk to someone about God's love, as we have considered and prepared for in item 2(c) above. Ask God to lead you, trust that He will provide an opportunity, and keep an alert lookout. When the opportunity arises, simply speak with sincerity and genuineness. Then, share your experience with your small group at the next meeting.