

Chapter 3 ended with the words, “This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (3:23–24). Chapter 4 is connected to these verses in the following three ways:

- 1) 4:1–6 will develop the first part of the commandment (believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ).
- 2) 4:7–5:5 will address the second aspect of the commandment (love one another).
- 3) However, the main connection between 3:23–24 and 4:1–6 is that possessing the Spirit only provides assurance if we can be sure that it is the Holy Spirit who is bearing testimony. We need to be able to distinguish between the supernatural and the divine, between the Spirit of God and evil spirits which may try to pose as being from God.

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH AND THE SPIRIT OF ERROR MUST BE DISTINGUISHED (4:1–6)

4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Testing every spirit is the responsibility of every believer because many false prophets have gone out into the world (4:1b) and the spirit of antichrist is already present (4:3). In chapter 2, John said that antichrists had even come from within in the church.

It’s interesting to note that right after the command *to believe* (3:23), John says “do not believe . . .”. In the same way, after the command *to love* (2:7–8) he says, “do not love . . .” (2:15). Both Christian faith and love are discerning. Christian faith is not gullibility. True faith examines its object before putting confidence in it. Both Paul (1 Thess. 5:19–22) and John insist that the Christian has the responsibility to use discernment regarding people’s claims of truth.

4:2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God;

4:3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.

Verse 1 states that there is an urgent need for Christians to distinguish between the Holy Spirit and other spirits; in verses 2 and 3 he moves to the test itself: “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.”

John is concerned that we know God. True knowledge of the invisible God is found in Christ; He is God incarnate (Jn. 1:1, 14). Therefore, believing that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (i.e. believing in the incarnation) is an essential profession of faith that makes it clear if an utterance is from the Spirit of God or another spirit. Every spirit that does not confess Jesus (i.e. that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh) is not from God.

The phrase, “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” has at least two implications. First, it means that Jesus existed prior to taking upon Himself human nature (Phil. 2). In order to “come” to the earth He had to

first exist (Jn. 3:13; 6:41; 8:58; 17:5). Secondly, “has come” is a perfect tense participle. The emphasis of the perfect tense is that of an action that happened in the past with continuing results. In other words, the incarnation was not a temporary event but a permanent union of God and man in Jesus (Marshall, 205). As Brooke says, “The revelation of God was made to men by the Son of God appearing in human form and living a human life . . . and its effects were abiding” (Brooke, 109).

John’s test is akin to that of Deuteronomy 13:1–6 and 18:15–22. In Deuteronomy, a false prophet was recognized if his words did not come to pass or if he tried to lead others away from the Lord by what he did and said; in 1 John 4:2–3, the test is related to what the person says about Jesus. Thus, the key doctrinal test is Christological. Nobody, no matter how hard they claim to be Christian, can be accepted if they deny Christ’s divinity or humanity (Stott, 155).

A critical assessment of religious teachers has always been necessary. Jesus gave a moral test: “You shall know them by their fruits.” John also applies a moral test including both righteousness (3:10) and love (4:8), but there is a theological test as well. Doctrine is an important criterion in identifying false teachers (Stott, 152). The spirit that is not to be believed in 4:1 is known by the type of speech it inspires (4:2–3).

Cults still today clamor for attention and many claim special revelation. There is an urgent need for discernment among Christians. We are often too gullible and exhibit a naive readiness to accept messages and teaching which report to be from the spirit world. There is such a thing as misguided charity and tolerance toward false doctrine. There needs to be a balance from the one extreme of believing everything to that of believing nothing (Stott, 152).

4:4 You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.

4:5 They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them.

4:6 We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

In verses 4–6 God turns our attention from those who give the erroneous message to those who hear it (Stott, 157).

Verse 4 says that we “are from God.” “From” is the Greek word “ἐκ” (ek). John uses this word 55 times in his writings to denote origin or spiritual dependence. A man is said to be “from God” or “from the Devil” because he draws his inspiration and all that dominates his thoughts and actions from one of those two sources (Brooke, 115). For example, 1 John 2:16 says, “all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not *from the Father*, but is *from the world*.” That is, God is not the source of lust and boastful pride, the world is. 1 John 3:8 says, “the one who practices sin is of (lit. “from”—ἐκ ek) the devil”; the devil is the source of evil which rules and fills man’s life. 1 John 3:9 speaks of the one “who is born of (lit. “from”—ἐκ ek) God”; the believer’s life is traceable back to God; it originates in God. In 3:12 Cain is said to be of (lit. “from”—ἐκ ek) the evil one; Satan was the source of Cain’s thoughts and behavior.

The perfect tense “have overcome” in verse 4 expresses confidence in our victory over those who tempt us to accept false teaching. The confidence is based on the fact that we have a different origin than them—we are “from God” (4:4). This will be developed in the verses that follow.

Our victory lies in God, not us. God abides in us (3:20, 24; Jn. 14:20; 15:4f.), and He is greater than Satan (“who is in the world”; elsewhere,

Satan is called the prince of this world [Jn. 12:31; 14:30] and the god of this age [2Cor. 4:4]).

In 4:1 John had said that many false prophets had gone out into the world; in 4:3 he added that the spirit of the antichrist was already in the world. In verse 5, he identifies the origin of the false teachers as people who are “from the world.” This explains why they are so widely received by the world. The world recognizes the voice of its own (contrast Jn. 1:11; 15:18, 21). Lenski says that the world likes its own speech but it “never rises higher than that which the world considers wisdom.” That is surely true today; most people only listen to what they want to hear from those who think like them. As Jesus said in John 8:47, “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.” He also said, “My sheep hear My voice” (Jn. 10:3, 4, 16, 27).

In verse 6 John says “we are from God”; that is, he and the other apostles are from God. Just as those from the world listen to those from the world (4:5), so those who are from God (4:4) listen to those who are from God. When the apostles who are from God confess Jesus is the incarnate God, those who are from God believe them. Those who do not listen to the apostolic teaching are not from God. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

GOD’S LOVE EXPRESSED (4:7–16)

In a rather abrupt manner, John switches from the subject of discerning true and false spirits to loving one another.

Having developed the first part of the commandment (believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ) in 4:1–6, John considers the second aspect of the commandment (to love one another) in 4:7–5:5.

4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

4:8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

The topic of loving one another has already been discussed in 2:9–11 and 3:13–18. But each time John’s comments become more searching. John compared love to the true light (2:8, 10), and then to the evidence of eternal life in us (3:14–15). In 4:7–8 the basis for Christians to love one another is given; we should love one another because God is the source of love (love is from God) and we are from God (4:4). The one who loves shows that he has experienced the new birth (“everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”).

When John says that God is love, we see that love is not merely an attribute of God; it is His nature (Brooke, 118). All His activities, even judgment, are governed by love. "God is love" does not mean "love is God." Love is not God; God is the source of love. He is love by nature.

4:9 By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him.

4:10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

The second reason for Christians to love one another is not based on God's nature, but on His historical gift. The origin of love is in God; the manifestation of His love is in Christ. This time the motive for us to love is not based on an abstract concept (God is love) but on a concrete truth that God demonstrated His love in Christ.

Verse 10 makes it clear that man is not the initiator of love; God is. Our efforts do not put us into God's favor; rather it is God who sent the Son to be a propitiation for our sins (see 1 Jn. 2:2 notes for "propitiation").

4:11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

4:12 No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

The gift of God's Son not only assures us of God's love for us, but lays upon us a moral obligation; namely, that we ought to love the way God loves (Stott, 163). Once we understand the incredible price paid for sin and the magnitude of our own sins, we will understand the love of God and joyfully demonstrate it ourselves. As Brooke says, "The proper result of divine birth is divine activity" (Brooke, 120).

Verse 12 introduces the third of three arguments that enforce the command of reciprocal love. Here are the first two:

(1) God's nature is love. Since we have a new nature from God (we are from God) we should love as God loves (4:7).

(2) God's love was historically manifested in Christ (4:9–10). We are both observers and recipients of that love. Therefore, we should love as we have been loved.

The third argument is stated in 4:12: "if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us."

The basic meaning of the word translated as "perfected" is "to bring to maturity or completeness," "to reach a goal," "to bring to an end," or "to come to full expression." For example, in Luke 2:43 it is translated as "ended" ("when the feast was ended"), in Luke 13:23 "I reach My goal," in John 4:34, 5:36, 17:4 "accomplish," Acts 20:24 "finish," and Heb. 2:10; 5:9; 7:19, 28; 9:9; 10:1, etc. "make perfect."

The latter half of verse 12 is making two observations:

- 1) if we love one another, God abides in us
- 2) if we love one another, His love is perfected in us.

The love we have for other believers demonstrates that we are indwelt by God (3:24; 4:13, 15, 16). Loving one another is also the evidence that His love is perfected in us. In other words, verse 12 seems to be saying that God's love has a goal to attain; it is attained when we love one another.

John is insisting that loving God and loving others cannot be separated (Akin, 181; cf. Matt. 25:40, 45). "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn. 4:20).

God cannot be seen, but in chapter 4 His love is seen in two ways: (1) it is revealed in the cross, and (2) it is revealed in our love for one another.

4:13 By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

4:14 We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.

The two phrases that concluded the previous paragraph ("God abides in us" and "God's love is perfected in us") are now elaborated upon. God's abiding in us is explained in 4:13–16 and perfected love in 4:17–21.

We are assured that we abide in God and He in us because He has given us the Spirit (4:13; 3:24). Romans 8:16 says, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God." It is also by the Spirit that we come to know the deity of Christ (1 Cor. 12:3) and by the same Spirit that we are able to love each other. The natural man can neither believe nor love. In his fallen state he is both blind and selfish.

There is not only the internal witness of the Spirit (4:13), there is also the external witness of those who saw the manifestation of God's love in Christ (4:14; Brooke, 121). Even though God the Father cannot be seen by men (4:12), faith in Him is never to stand on subjective experience alone. Faith is built on the historical events, in particular, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Though no man has seen God, John can say, "we have seen the One whom He has sent." In other words, there are two witnesses that help us know that we abide in the Father and He in us—the Holy Spirit and the apostles who saw the Son (Jn. 15:26–27; Acts 5:32).

4:15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

Believing in Jesus is more than believing that Jesus is our Savior; it includes believing in the incarnation (confessing that Jesus is the Son of God; contrast 4:2–3). The one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God is displaying evidence that God abides in him, and he in God.

4:16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

The main idea is knowledge, but that knowledge is explained and qualified by faith. In the overall picture neither faith nor knowledge can be neglected for spiritual growth. Knowledge is impossible without faith and faith is impossible without knowledge. We must know something in order to believe it. But faith in what we know also opens the way to fuller knowledge.

In commenting on 4:16b, Bruce notes, “The love which dwells in the community of God’s children and which they show to one another is His love imparted to them. More than that: the God of love imparts Himself to His people, so dwelling within them that they, in their turn, dwell in His love and dwell in Him” (Bruce, 112). When we abide in God’s love, we abide in God because God is love.

GOD’S LOVE PERFECTED (4:17–5:3)

4:17 By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.

In verse 17 John tells us how to have confidence or boldness on the Day of Judgment. And in verse 18 he tells us how to cast fear out of our lives. These are simply positive and negative ways of saying the same thing: getting rid of fear is the negative way of saying become confident.

“By this” (that is, by the mutual abiding of God in us and we in Him) God’s love for us and our love for God is perfected or completed.

“So that” is explanatory, telling us how love is completed; namely, it is completed when we have confidence in the Day of Judgment.

In other words, God’s love comes into full expression through the close relationship that we have with Him which results in our confidence in the Day of Judgment (Smalley, 257). Confidence at the judgment is the mark of completed love.

It is difficult to understand what is meant by “because as He is, so also are we in this world” and how it logically fits into the sentence. The best way of understanding this involves seeing a connection to John 15:9–10. There Jesus said, “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.” The relationship of believers to Christ is like the relationship of Jesus to the Father. 1 John 4:17b is expressing the same idea—we are as He is: “as He (Jesus) is (in the Father’s love), so also are we (in the Father’s love)” (Smalley, 259). In addition, the Farewell Discourse (Jn. 14–17) emphasizes that the believer remains in the world though he is not part of the world (Jn. 17:11, 15, 18). Thus, John also adds “in this world” at the end of verse 17 (Smalley, 259). The world is a place of evil, but also the environment God works in to bring people to salvation.

The assumption is that, at the judgment day, God won’t condemn people who are like His Son.

4:18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.

Verse 18 repeats the thought of verse 17 and explains it more fully. Verse 17 says when love is perfected in us we will be confident in the Day of Judgment; verse 18 says perfected love drives out any fear of punishment.

Fear of punishment stems from the fear of God's judgment just as the fear of heights comes from the fear of falling or the fear of water comes from the fear drowning (Jobes). If we fear punishment, it is because we fear God's judgment. God's abiding in us and we in Him bring God's love to completion by giving us confidence that we will not be judged and punished.

If we do not fear judgment there is nothing left to fear, including punishment (4:18). Thus, perfect love casts out fear and the one who fears is not perfected in love (4:18). The one who fears has not reached the goal afforded to him by the gift of God's love; for him God's love has not yet become a reality (Smalley, 261).

4:19 We love, because He first loved us.

In verse 19 John returns to the practice of love by the child of God. We love, but our love toward men and God first comes from God. Any love that we might show originates in God's love.

4:20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.

If divine initiative lies behind all true loving (4:19), then it follows that the one who hates does not abide in God and He in him.

The assumption appears to be that it is easier to love someone who is visible and tangible than someone we cannot see. If we cannot love our brother who is continually before our eyes, we cannot love God whom we cannot see. If we fail at the easier task, it is absurd to claim success at the harder (Stott, 171).

4:21 And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

The commandment to love God and fellow believers comes from God.

- Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."
- Leviticus 19:18: ". . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself. . ."