

1 JOHN – CHAPTER 3:22B-4:6

Test the Spirits

INTRODUCTION

In 1 John 3:4-22a, the author contrasts believers, identified by God as children of God through faith in Jesus, with antichrists, identified as children of the devil for denying Christ. The passage emphasizes that identity, not actions, defines believers, with the sin as the message of “Jesus is not the Christ.” The more recent context demonstrates that love is a command based on their God-given identity. Verses 18-22a focus on love as an active, deliberate response to the challenge by God to believers to love “in deed and in truth” by meeting brothers’ needs, unlike antichrists who close their hearts (3:17-18). This love is an obligation, having first been loved by God through Christ’s sacrifice. The audience has been duped by the antichrists, and now their body is responsible for evaluating their teachers. By evaluating teachers’ love and doctrine, they can discern who is of the truth, assuring their hearts before God (3:19-20). When their hearts affirm true teachers, they gain boldness and receive answers to prayers aligned with God’s truth (3:21-22a), reinforcing their secure identity as God’s children.

In this final section, we will see everything coalesce into a simple instruction: test the spirits. The good thing is that the test is simple: those who listen to the Apostles are true, those who do not are false (spirit of truth and the spirit of error).

1 JOHN 3:22B-24 – WE KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS

1 John 3:19-24 - My Translation – English Rendering

And by this we will know, we are of the truth, and in His sight we will assure our heart whatever it condemns, God is greater than our heart and knows all. Beloved, whatever our heart does not condemn, we have boldness before God, and when we ask, we receive from Him.

We keep His commandments and do the things pleasing in His sight and this is His commandment so that we would believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He gave commandment to us. And the one keeping His commandments abides in Him, and He in him; by this we know He abides in us, by the spirit which He has given to us.

EXPOSITION

Beginning in verse 22b, “We keep His commandments...” is a clear and true statement. The Apostles and the recipients of this letter are the first person plural. The confusion of most readers is that there is an assumption that “the commandments” are the ten commandments or the sum of the four Gospels, the Sermon on the Mount, the Upper Room, or any number of the commandments in the Law of Moses. All we have to do is keep reading.

His commandments, in this text, are:

1. Believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ
2. Love one another

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Verse 24 begins with an articular participle, “the one keeping His commandments.” This identifies believers in the eyes of God as ones who are believers in Jesus and lovers of the brethren. This is who they are, and ideally what they should be doing.

As we know, the antichrists made some headway with their message, so some believers need to shed off the false message that Jesus is not the Christ and reestablish their belief in Jesus as the Christ.

The previous section and the following section state repeatedly that these believers should love the brethren, and love must be true, rooted in Christ, and complete. Even though they are identified as ones who keep his commandments, which include loving one another, they are struggling with it.

In verse 24, we also see this statement about abiding in Him and He abiding in the one keeping His commandments. Do not overcomplicate this. This is a security verse that demonstrates the unity of God and the believer by decree, not activity.

The last part of verse 24 is a little messy. Let’s review my translation: “By this we know He abides in us, by the spirit which He has given to us.”

The translations like to capitalize this word, indicating that it is the Holy Spirit. Many things can be true at the same time.

1. God gave us the Holy Spirit, and He indwells in us
2. God renews our spirit and is in us
3. This verse is speaking to neither of those facts

καί	by	this	We know	that	He abides	in
καί	ἐν	οὗτος	γινώσκω	ὅτι	μένω	ἐν
kai	en	houtos	ginōskō	hoti	menō	en
CONJ	PREP	D-DSN	V-PAI-1P	CONJ	V-PAI-3S	PREP
us,	by	the	Spirit	whom	us.	He has given
ἐγώ	ἐκ	ὁ	πνεῦμα	ὃς	ἐγώ	δίδωμι
egō	ek	ho	pneuma	hos	egō	didōmi
P-DP	PREP	T-GSN	N-GSN	R-GSN	P-DP	V-AAI-3S

The overall translation is not difficult, but there is some nuance. The capitalization of “πνεῦμα pnuma” is an interpretation, not a translation. The second nuance is the relative pronoun. Here, it is translated as “whom” because of the interpretation that the Spirit is a person. The Greek word “ὃς hos” means: a relative pronoun (who, which, what, that). So, the translation of the word could be “which,” making it less representative of a person.

Obviously, you know I am setting something up. The question is, what does the author mean by “the spirit.” I believe we have clues as we look forward.

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1 JOHN 4:1-6 – TEST THE SPIRITS

Read 1 John 4:1-6 and count how many times the word spirit is used. By count, it is used eight times, if we add in verse 24, that is nine times in seven verses.

The understanding of “pnuma” here will have a drastic impact on theology and how spirituality works. Here are three different views on this:

1. ‘Spirit’ refers to an incorporeal being who inspires the person “do not believe every spirit (who speaks through a person).” The spirit is either the Holy Spirit or an evil spirit that dwells within the antichrists.”
2. ‘Spirit’ refers to a person who is inspired by a spirit: “do not believe every spirit-inspired person.” A prophet is so closely identified with the spirit who inspires him, that the term ‘spirit’ may be used for the person himself. A person is either inspired by the spirit of truth or the spirit of error.
3. ‘Spirit’ refers to the person’s own spirit: “do not believe every person.” The spirit of a person is the representative part of the inner life. Human spirits are to be tested to see if they represent the spirit of truth or the spirit of error.

Now there is one more, and think about this for just a moment.

4. ‘Spirit’ refers to the utterances inspired by a spirit.

The apostles were given utterance by the Holy Spirit, doctrine, truth.

Satan also has a doctrine that has gone out into the world, now is that specific directed information from Satan to a false prophet. Maybe, or perhaps, he has set up a system as the ruler of this world that twists, warps, and denies what is true.

In 1 John 3:24, we know that He abides in us, how? Because of the revelation of God through the Apostles, as the Holy Spirit gave them utterance. So “the spirit that he gave to us” refers to the utterance, revelation, the message that God has given through the Holy Spirit.

When the author then instructs them to test the spirits (4:1), he is telling them to evaluate the message to see who is really speaking, who is behind the message. This is reinforced with the statement, “Many false prophets have gone out into the world.” What is the activity of false prophets? Promote a false message.

How do you know the spirit of God, the message of God, reflects the truth of God? In this situation, the problem is about the identity of Jesus Christ. Every spirit, every message that is founded upon the truth of Jesus Christ, having come in the flesh, is from God. Remember that this audience is dealing with a particular problem; this is not a universal exclusive test. But the inverse is absolutely exclusive, any message that states that Jesus Christ has not come in the flesh is antichrist.

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The question is not a gnostic one; rather, it is whether or not the Messiah has come in the flesh. Regardless, the identity and function of Jesus are under attack by the antichrists, and the author is instructing the audience to test the message of the antichrists against the message of the Apostles, which they had received from the Holy Spirit.

You are from God – another clear demonstrative statement of identity of who they are in the eyes of God. Not only that he also tells them something about the battle that they may not have known.

The little children have overcome them –

νικάω nikaō - to win in the face of obstacles (be victor, conquer, overcome, prevail); to overcome someone (vanquish, overcome).

They, the children, have overcome the antichrists. How? “Greater is He in you than he in the world.” The word for greater is “μέγας megas.” Who is in the world?

Verses 5 and 6 are the absolute climax of 1 John - Keeping with the theme of that the false teachers the author is contrasting teaching from the false teachers and true Apostolic Teaching. The author does this by stating plainly that they are from the world, the message is from the world, and those who are from the world listen to their teaching.

The Pronoun “they” goes back to the false prophets from verse 1. When reviewing who they are, we should be reminded that John and the rest of the apostles are not afraid to name the enemy and inform the readership as to who these enemies are. Reviewing who they are in this letter.

1. 2:9-11 – Hates the brethren, walks in darkness
2. 2:18 – Antichrists
3. 2:22 – Liar
4. 2:22-23 – Denies the Father and the Son
5. 2:26 – Deceivers
6. 3:4,8 – The One who practices sin
7. 3:10 – Child of the devil
8. 3:14-15 – Murderer
9. 4:1 – False prophets
10. 4:5 – Of the world

They are “ek” the world. They are sourced in the world, they speak worldly wisdom, and the wisdom they speak appeals to a worldly mind. The world listens to them.

The word for listen is the word we get for hearing, “ἀκούω akouō.” Listening is not simply writing notes but an active listening with a response. The antithesis to the world is the children, and they listen to the Apostles. The last phrase is not a litmus test but an observation that is a truth. Those who are of God listen to the truth; those who are of the devil will either change their minds or fight and run from it.