



Week 4: 1 John 3:9-4:6

Breaking the Cycle

1. Five Things We Know

What's something you know to be absolutely, positively, 100% true? Benjamin Franklin famously wrote that nothing is certain except for death and taxes. John knew that the church he was writing to was facing a lot of uncertainty about their faith.

Raymond Brown writes that the different voices had led to significant divisions in the church, “sparked by different views of Jesus” (Introduction to the New Testament, 383). With all kinds of voices echoing in their ears, these believers were in dire need of some doctrinal clarity. N.T. Wright summarizes the situation this way:

“Clearly the people to whom John is writing are in danger of being at best thoroughly confused, and at worst blown right off course, by all the different ideas, different claims, different would-be prophets with their various oracles, and so on, that are swirling all around them.”

The Early Christian Letters, 154.



In **1 John 3:10-24**, John uses the phrase “We know...” seven times to articulate five key truths that the Christian can be certain of:

1. We are children of God (**1 John 3:10**)
2. We have passed from death to life (**1 John 3:14**)
3. True love was defined at the cross (**1 John 3:16**)
4. We belong to the truth (**1 John 3:19**)
5. God lives in us (**1 John 3:24**).

1. We are Children of God.

John had previously celebrated the incredible fact that God considers us his children (**1 John 3:1-2**). For those Christians who were doubting this identity in the face of their moral failings or perhaps the new teachings of false prophets who called their faith into question, John gives a clear standard by which we can know for certain that we are God’s children: “*This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God’s child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister*” **1 John 3:10** (NIV).

The proof of a Christian’s divine parentage is their commitment to doing what is right and loving their brothers and sisters. The standard is not a perfect life that is entirely free from sin, since John has emphasized in other passages like **1 John 1:8** that no

Christian can ever claim to be sinless. The standard involves a way of life, an overarching theme—a commitment to walk as Jesus did:

“The child of God does sin. But as John has explained, the will of God can be identified in the general rule of life as he exhibits the nature of his Father in his deeds. All of this is probably to refute those who hold that they have fellowship with God and know him, but who do not attempt to walk as he walked.”

Roberts, 87.

2. We have Passed from Death to Life

You could make a strong argument that the single greatest moment in human history was Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. His journey from life to death to eternal life is an allegory of the spiritual journey that we are all on.

Just as Jesus was died and was brought back to new life, believers have passed from spiritual death to spiritual life. Jesus says that the one who hears and believes his words has “crossed over from death to life” (**John 5:24**, NIV). In **Romans 6:4**, Paul teaches that everyone who has been baptized has been buried in a watery grave and subsequently raised to a new life with Jesus. In **Ephesians 2**, Paul again uses the language of dead to sin but alive in Christ to describe our spiritual journey.

John reassures his audience that they have indeed passed from death to life, and there is nothing left that is required of them to receive the gift of their salvation: *“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death”* (1 John 3:14, NIV).

For John, the measure of a person’s spiritual rebirth is their decision to love others.

“The Christian who finds the habit of loving others, even his enemies, taking root in his heart can take this as clear evidence that he has made the crossing over into the realm of life and is abiding there.”

Roberts, *The Letters of John*, 91.

3. True Love was Defined at the Cross

In the Princess Bride, a mystical healer named miracle Max said *“Sonny, true love is the greatest thing in the world.”* As Christians, we know that true love is found at the cross. John reminds the church that doing right and loving others are the signs that we’re truly children of God who have passed from death to life. Perhaps anticipating their next question—what does it mean to really love one another—John defines love by pointing us to the cross: *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters”* (1 John 3:16, NIV).

You can’t claim to be a follower of Jesus unless you follow his example of love.

“The first test of gospel profession is the practical expression of love toward fellow believers in proximity. Absent this, the claim to know and have God’s love is a sham.”

Yarbrough, 1-2-3 John 205.

And what is love? We know true love by looking to Jesus’ sacrifice for all of humankind. In **Romans 5:8**, Paul joins John in seeing the cross as the ultimate demonstration of God’s love for his wayward children: *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (NIV).

4. We Belong to the Truth

One of the deepest desires of every human heart is to be fully known and fully loved. To be known but not loved is a painful confirmation that we are not worthy, that we are without value, that we are inherently

deficient. To be loved but not fully known gives us fleeting happiness but a deep sense of inadequacy, in that we feel that the only way that we are loved is by changing or concealing who we are.

John encourages the church by reminding them they are fully known and fully loved by God. The reason they know they belong to the truth is that God knows all truth—including everything about them—and still does not condemn them: *“This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: 20 If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God”* (1 John 3:19-20, NIV).

When we are filled with guilt and shame because of our past mistakes, God’s love stands above the self-judgment of our hearts to speak peace and acceptance into our lives. Although we have every reason to condemn ourselves, God chooses to reign over the self-condemnation that we are so quick to give.

5. God Lives in Us.

Before Jesus went to the cross, he promised his disciples that he would send them a helper, an advocate, to live with them. This advocate would be God’s Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God existed from the very beginning, but it was rarely given to individuals. It might appear for a short while to help a person



with an especially difficult task (like Samson defeating a lion with his bare hands in **Judges 14:6**), but it was typically not given as a permanent gift.

For disciples of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is a permanent gift that proves beyond all doubt that God lives in us, and we in him: *“And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us”* (**1 John 3:24**, NIV).

Summary

A healthy dose of humility is a sign of a mature believer. There are some things in life that we can be mostly sure about without ever being completely confident. But when it comes to our faith, there are several things that we can know with absolutely certainty. We know we are children of God, we know we have passed from death to life, we know that true love is defined by the cross, we know we belong to the truth, and we know God lives in us.

2. Christian Ethics and the Cycle of Sin (1 John 3:9-15)

There’s two types of people in the world: those who wait for the crosswalk hand to turn green before they go, and those who go when the street is clear regardless of what the light says. I confess to you that I’m a rule follower, so I could be the only person within miles of that intersection and I would still wait for the crosswalk light to turn green. I find comfort in knowing that I’m doing what I’m supposed to... sometimes to the chagrin of my family who has already crossed the street, eaten their lunch, read *War and Peace* and is now patiently waiting for me to cross over as well.

Bible scholars are confident that one of the conflicts within the church John was writing to involved the question of Christian ethics or morality: Do we need to follow the rules? Is it enough to believe in Jesus as Lord, or do we also need to follow his commands?

Raymond Brown summarizes the debate this way:

“One group felt that [Jesus’] actions set a moral standard to be followed; the other held that simply believing in the Word was all that mattered, and what Christians did had no more importance than what Jesus did.”

Introduction to the New Testament, 383.

John comes down very strongly on the side of Christian ethics. What we do in this life really matters. Following the commands of Jesus really matters. Ignoring the teachings and lifestyle of Jesus while claiming to be his follower is a shocking incongruity in the life of a supposed believer.



Sin Never Stays in Quarantine.

Sin is a potent danger that threatens to invade and conquer a believer's heart, mind, soul and strength. The problem of sin is that it is by nature a multiplying entity. Sin does not shrink or stay stagnant on its own; rather, it grows and grows unless we make a concerted effort to purify ourselves by walking in the light. Simply put: sin doesn't care about our boundaries, our lives, our marriages, or our relationship with God. Sin never stays in quarantine, and as such it is a very real threat to the Christians John is writing to.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that the problem of sin begins with an evil, impure thought. *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart"* (**Matthew 5:27-28**, NIV).

The act of adultery is by all objective standards a greater offense than simply lusting after someone you find attractive, but Jesus treats them as two sides of the same coin, or perhaps two points on the same linear progression.

We have a tendency to identify the moral or ethical boundaries placed on us and then tiptoe right up to the edge of that line without going over. Jesus' words in **Matthew 5** teach us that the real problem begins long before a person crosses the line. The impure desire, left unchecked, will undoubtedly lead to a concrete action that violates God's standards in our lives. Sin doesn't stay in quarantine—instead, it snowballs into a bigger and bigger problem when we fail to attack it with the seriousness it deserves.

David's Sin Spirals out of Control

When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband murdered in battle, there were divesting consequences for all kinds of innocent people that were caught in his path. David's sin started long before any physical actions took place. In **2 Samuel 11**, David's sin began with form of laziness, or a dereliction of his duty as King. With his soldiers at war and lots of time to kill, David's restlessness led him to the rooftop, where he noticed and lusted after Bathsheba. His impure thoughts and desires led to a sexual assault. When Bathsheba became pregnant, David hatched a deceitful plot to cover his guilt, which included intentionally getting Uriah drunk to make it easier to manipulate him. When that plot failed because of Uriah's honor, David had him killed in battle.

David's laziness led to rape and murder, because sin never stays in quarantine.

"If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

Genesis 4:7 (NIV)

Sin Speeds Out of Control

In the book of James, the Bible describes sin as a sort of infectious disease that grows out of control: *“But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death”* (**James 1:14-15**, NIV).

Sin starts small, but like a snowball that begins a slow descent down the slope of a snowy mountain, it quickly gathers more strength and destruction as it turns into an avalanche. Sin is a powerful force that must be kept in check and conquered.

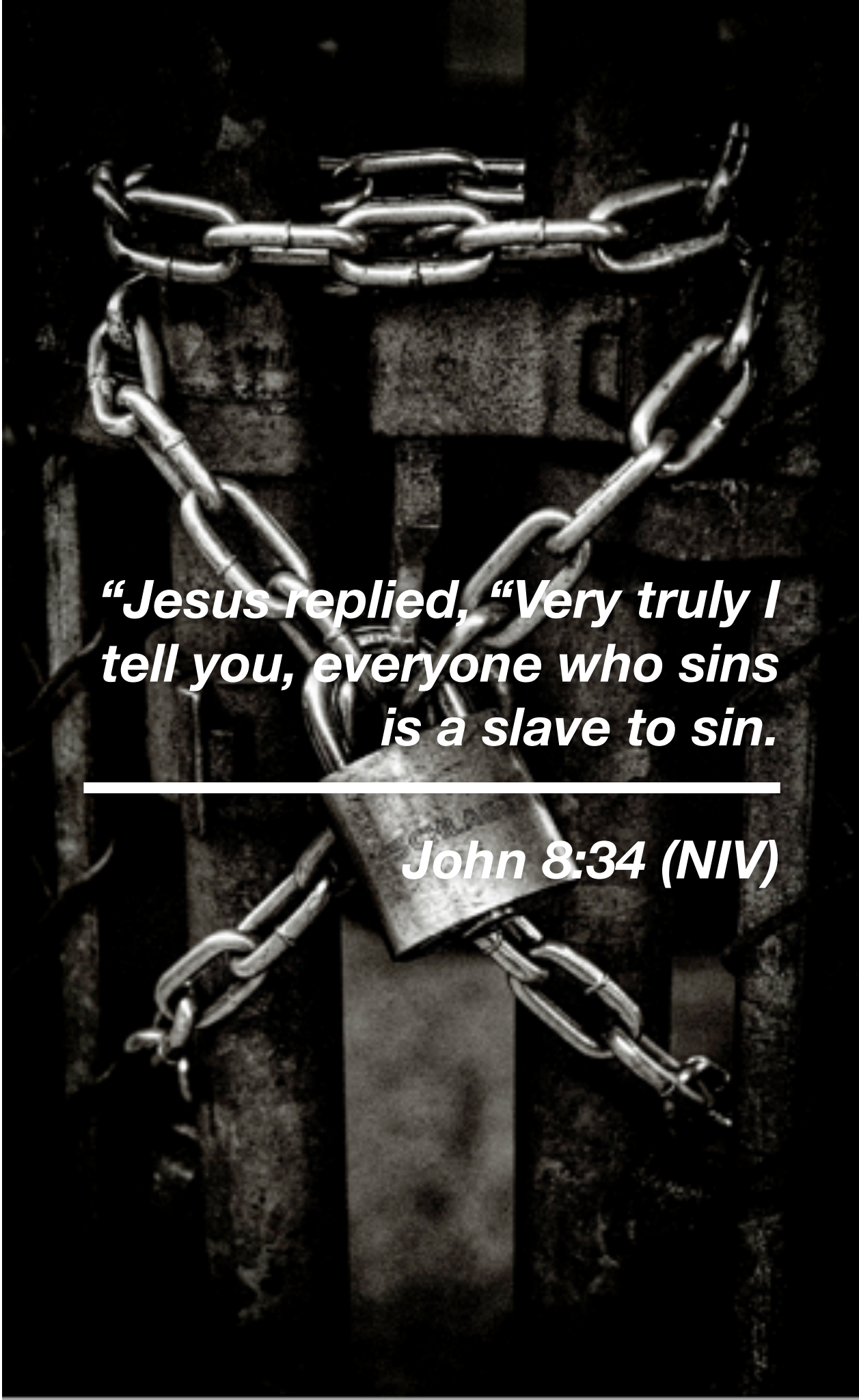
The wise master Yoda once said *“Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.”* In Genesis, when Cain’s anger and jealousy began to spiral out of control, God intervened and spoke with Cain in a clear and confident manner. He warned Cain to put his desires in check before they got the best of him:

6 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7 If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it” (**Genesis 4:6-7**, NIV).

God describes sin as an enemy that crouches at the door, waiting to pounce on us. Peter gives us a similar warning in **1 Peter 5:8** (NIV), *“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”*

The Consequences of Sin

One of the consequences of sin is the loss of control. Sin moves people down a path they would never travel on their own. In **Romans 7:17-20** (NIV), the Apostle Paul speaks with anguished words about the powerlessness he felt as sin began to spiral out of control: *“As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the*



“Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”

John 8:34 (NIV)

evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.”

Sin not only spreads, but it conquers. It overrides our desire to do what is right and pushes us well past the lines we once swore we would never cross. Paul confesses that at times, his desire to do what is right lives in subordination to the power of sin. Sin never stays in quarantine.

3. Breaking the Cycle

Sin is a dangerous threat to the faith of a believer. Without careful attention, confession and discipline, sin can spiral out of control. But the idea of out-of-control sin is already a reality in the world around us. Although Jesus has won the ultimate victory on the cross, the world we live in is still affected by sin and darkness.

People who do not know Jesus are stuck in a cycle of sin. In the early stages of their lives, they are mistreated, attacked, insulted, and sinned against. From a place of anger and pain and brokenness, they respond in kind and perpetuate the cycle of sin.

As Christians, we have an important responsibility to break that cycle. Yehuda Berg writes *“Hurt people hurt people. That’s how pain patterns gets passed on, generation after generation after generation. Break the chain today. Meet anger with sympathy, contempt with compassion, cruelty with kindness. Greet*

grimaces with smiles. Forgive and forget about finding fault. Love is the weapon of the future.”

The best way to break the cycle of sin is to follow the teachings of Jesus: love one another—especially your enemies.

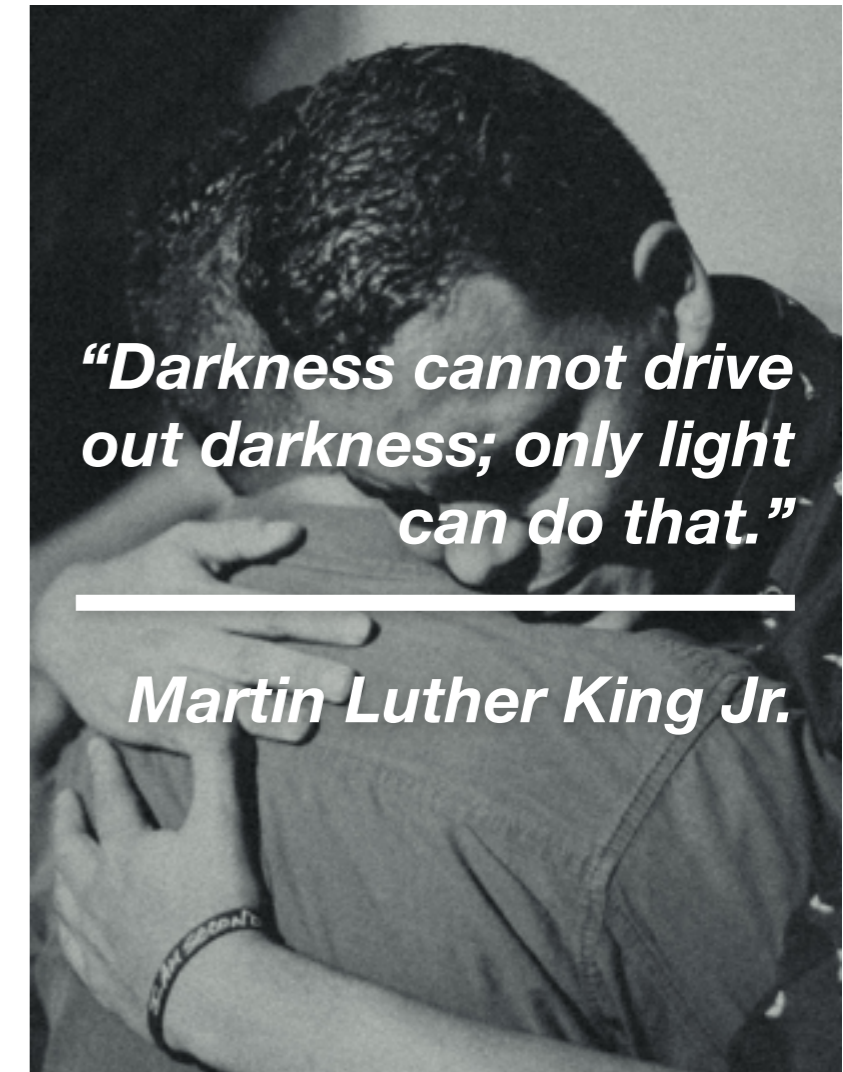
1 John 3:16-18 (NIV) focuses on the love of Jesus and then transitions to our responsibility to show the same kind of love to others, in practical, tangible ways:

“16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

Martin Luther King Jr. once said *“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”* Likewise, Robert Yarbough writes, *“Love’s absence testifies to death’s dominance”* (1-2-3 John, 201).

To break the cycle of sin, God’s people need to show real, tangible love to anyone and everyone that God puts in their path.

Doing the right thing and loving others is an act of faith whose aim is to honor God, protect the faith of the believer, and take steps to breaking the cycle of sin and evil in our world.



“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

4. Testing the Spirits

The final section of this passage deals with passing a test. I’ve taken hundreds, if not thousands of tests in my lifetime. Some of them felt more consequential than others—like the SAT as I applied to colleges, or a driving test to get my license. But there’s perhaps no greater test than the one John talks about: How do you know if a person who claims to speak for God is telling the truth?

There are many, many people who claim to speak for God, but not all of them are

sincere—or right. N.T. Wright explains it this way:

“But John knows, as indeed Jesus himself had warned, and as we in our day need to learn all over again, that not everyone who claims to be a prophet is a prophet in fact.”

N.T. Wright, *The Letters of John*, 154.

John writes to the church and commands them to test the spirits—to discern whether they are speaking their own ideas, or the truth that God has revealed. And how can we know if a person is truly speaking for God? By determining whether they believe in Jesus Christ as the son of God who came in the flesh. Against a backdrop of heretics who claimed Jesus only appeared to be human, this test was truly a crucial standard for the church to enforce as it listened to Christian leaders and teachers of various kinds.

But doctrine is not the only test. As we have seen, it is not enough to simply know the right ideas about Jesus—you have to follow through with the right actions, and the right heart. Robert Yarbrough makes that point when he writes,

“It should be remembered that the doctrinal test, however, is not the only test. From what John has already written, his readers would understand that, along with doctrine, ethics and love are equally important calling cards of gospel truth”

Yarbrough, *1-2-3 John*, 223

Application

We can be confident about our standing before God because of our commitment to follow the teachings of Jesus and our commitment to love others the way Jesus has loved us. We know that sin is an ever-present reality in the world we live in, but it must be called out, addressed, and conquered in a clear and powerful way. Sin’s nature is to spread, and it is the duty of every follower of Jesus to treat it with the seriousness it deserves.

Knowing that sin is so prevalent in our world, we have an important privilege and responsibility as children of God: to live and love in such a way to break the cycle of sin. If that sounds difficult, then perhaps you’ll find encouragement in the truth that the spirit of God that lives in you is greater than the spirit of this world (**1 John 4:4**)!

Finally, we need to be careful about the messages and ideas that we allow to soak into our minds and hearts. The ideas we accept turn into the decisions we make. And it’s crucial to carefully evaluate the spiritual teaching we receive against the standard of Jesus, his love, and his commands.

