

# Study 5: 1st John Chapter 4

## **Introduction**

The culmination of putting our faith into practice is demonstrated in our ultimate (*agape*) love for God and for our brethren. The theme of love permeates John's letters, and he gives us assurance of our relationship.

## **Body of the Study**

### **Introduction**

### **Testing the False Teachers**

### **The Test of True Love**

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### **Conclusion on Love**

## **Homework and preparation for next week:**

*Read the notes as a review of the study*

*Read chapter 5 in preparation for the next study*

*What are some modern-day representatives of "the spirit of the antichrist"? What tests should we apply to them?*

*What are some of the practical ways that you can show (agape) love to your brothers and sisters in Christ this week?*

*What three assurances does John give in this chapter, that "we live in Him, and He lives in us"?*

## Notes for study 5: 1<sup>st</sup> John Chapter 4

The culmination of putting our faith into practice is demonstrated in our ultimate (*agape*) love for God and for our brethren. The theme of love permeates John's letters, and he gives us assurance of our relationship.

### **Introduction**

The third test of our assurance with God is comes from testing the false teachers. Of course, it's not just false teachers who need to be tested, but all teachers – otherwise how would we know which ones were false! The *specific* instruction that John gives relates to the *specific* problem that was occurring at the time – that of the Gnostics, who were denying the deity of Jesus.

However, although the specific test does not apply to every situation, the principle that John gives does apply. We need to test the things that people say, to see whether they are the truth or not (1 Thess 5:21, Acts 17:11); and the test is whether or not they stand up to the scrutiny of conformity with the scriptures.

### **Testing the False Teachers**

These people had a resemblance of christianity, and what they said sounded plausible – but we need to remember that their motivation was to deceive the brethren (1:2:26). The doctrine that they taught was not the “old old story” of christianity, but something “new” that they were claiming to have come from God by their special revelation. John says “...*Dear friends, 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...*” (1:4:1 NIV). These people were not just claiming to be christians, but were also claiming inspiration by *the spirit*.

The purpose of the miraculous gifts in the first century was to confirm the (truth of the) things that were taught (Mk 16:20; Acts 8:6; Heb 2:3-4). When God's complete and perfect revelation was given with the completion of the New Testament, then the need for the partial revelation through the miraculous gifts was done away (1 Cor 13:8-13). God will not grant the signs and wonders to confirm things that were false! So, we need to put the claims to the test “...*This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,<sup>3</sup> but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God...*” (1:4:2-3 NIV). Whilst this test applied to the Gnostics, it does not apply to every false teacher! There are many false teachers who acknowledge the historicity (the historical presence of Jesus – that He came in the flesh) and the Deity (that He is God) of Jesus. The statement is also made in the context of the first century miraculous gifts. Because we don't have those gifts today, we can't test the nature of *the spirits* in the same way that John instructs in the first century. Yet, we can test them against God's revealed word!

The readers were already aware that the Antichrists were coming, and John proclaims that they are already here in the persons of the false teachers “...*This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world...*” (1:4:3 NIV).

Probably John refers to previous teaching which he had already given the leaders at times when he had preached among them. Less likely he could be referring to the previous passage in this letter (2:18ff)<sup>1</sup>.

John encourages the brethren to remain faithful in continuing to resist the false teachers “...*You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world...*” (1:4:4 NKJV). Their faith was tested when they were confronted with the false teachers. They had to make a choice of standing in the *orthodox* belief and practices that

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, p.107.

they had been taught, or going with the *new teaching*. They stood for the truth, and John commends them for their stand, and reminds them that God is all-powerful.

The false teachers do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them because "living" involves "fellowship," which is possible between God and his children only by the Holy Spirit. The false teachers are without this fellowship. Therefore they do not love because they do not know love. The antichrist can be "in the world" and evil spirits can be "in the false teachers," but "living in God" is possible only for the children of God. (NIVBC).

In contrast to the faithful Christians, John describes the false teachers "...*They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them...*" (1:4:5 NKJV). The Gnostics must have been having some degree of success, since John describes how they had been heard (ie – "followed") by those who did not truly love God. The things that they said were addressed to those who minded worldly (rather than spiritual) things. This probably doesn't mean "worldly" in the sense that we might understand it (smoking, drinking, gambling, swearing, riotous living, sexually promiscuous, etc, etc), but rather those who were truly committed to God.

He clarifies this train of thought with another contrast in the next verse "...*We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us...*" (1:4:6 NKJV). If we truly belong to God, then we will listen to what God's messengers (the apostles and prophets) have to say, and will accept it as the true message from God. But those who do not belong to God (those who are not of His flock (Jn 10:26) do not listen to or comprehend what God has to say. This is the test of whether we belong to God. "...*By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error...*" (1:4:6 NKJV).

### **The Test of True Love**

In the third section of the letter, John expounds the subject of love – *agape* love – the same "unconditional" love that God has for us. [I use the word "unconditional" in inverted commas, because whilst God's love for us is unconditional (He loved us whilst we were his adversaries because of our sin), the benefits of that love in our salvation *are* conditional – they are dependent upon our faith and obedience to Him.] As Christians, we are to express that same kind of love (*agape* love) to our fellow brethren.

In addressing the brethren, John uses a form of that very word *agapetos* (beloved / loved ones / dear friends) to show the kind of love that he has for them. "...*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who lives is born of God and knows God...*" (1:4:7 NKJV). Throughout the section, he refers to *agape* love. If we are the recipient of God's love (because of our faith and obedience to Him), then we need to show the same kind of love to our brethren. In contrast "...*He who does not love does not know God, for God is love...*" (1:5:8 NKJV). *Agape* love is the fulfilment of God's character in our lives (c/f the Christian growth pattern, 2 Pet 1:5-7), and John makes the point that it is as just important in our lives as righteous living (1:2:29).

Love here is not to be understood as one of God's many activities; rather, every activity of his is loving activity. Since this is true of God, our failure to love can only mean that we have no true knowledge of God, we have not really been born of him, and we do not have his nature. (NIVBC).

The depth of God's love and the statement *God is love* is shown by His actions. "...*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him...*" (1:4:9 NIV). God made the complete and perfect sacrifice. Hundreds of years before, Abraham was told to sacrifice his only son – the one he had waited so long for. Abraham's faith was tested, but he believed God, counting that God was capable of raising him from the dead (Heb 11:17-19). By (figuratively) putting ourselves in the same situation, we learn what sacrifice is, and then we can understand the sacrifice that God made for us. Sacrifice is one thing, but why would anyone want to make such a sacrifice? The answer is because God's love for us was so great, that it was a sacrifice that He was willing to make (Jn 3:16-17).

The purpose of God's act is "that we might live through him." Death is our present condition (cf. 3:14); God intended that we might find life in him so that we might live in love as he works in and through us. (NIVBC)

The strength of true *agape* love is contrasted to that shown by the Gnostics "...*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins...*" (1:4:10 NIV). The Gnostics might have claimed to love God, but by their actions they denied Him. Whatever kind of "love" they might have showed was of no comparison to the true love shown by God to us. Jesus (whose deity was denied by the Gnostics) became our atoning sacrifice (propitiation NKJV) for our sins – He paid the price, and bought us back!

True love is shown when we put the same kind of love into practice in our lives "...*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another...*" (1:4:11 NKJV). Christianity is not an "individual sport" – it is a "team game". We cannot walk with God in isolation – we need fellowship with one another to survive and to stir each other up to go on to love and good works (Heb 10:24-25). God knew what He was doing when He established the church, to provide exactly the right conditions for us to grow and prosper spiritually. We are here to serve one another, and to do that we first need to love one another with the same kind of love that God demonstrated towards us.

The Gnostics (apparently) had the idea that they had a spiritual vision, and through that, God had revealed Himself to them. John is quite clear, and blunt "...*No one has ever seen God...*" (1:4:12 NIV). Yet, we can know the Father by knowing Jesus (Jn 12:44; 14:7,9). Whist Jesus was once present on the earth, and God was present with us through Him (Mt 1:23), God is now present with us in the person of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:11), but also God's character lives in us when we have the complete (*agape*) love. "...*but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us...*" (1:4:12 NIV).

With this conclusion, we can begin to understand a little better John's urgent concern for the "fellowship" of the community of believers. It was not an optional "blessing" or "fruit" of belief that so deeply concerned him but the basic question of God's presence and manifestation in the world through a community that has a love originating in him. (NIVBC)

### ***The Test of the Spirit***

The final test of whether we are truly in fellowship with God, is shown by the manifestation of the Holy Spirit "...*We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit...*" (1:4:13 NIV). In the first century church (to whom John wrote) it was manifest by the miraculous spiritual gifts. But the same statement is also true of the indwelling manifestation of the Holy Spirit, who lives in every christian. Paul says that this is given to us as an assurance of our relationship with God (Rom 8:23; Eph 1:13-14; 4:30; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5).

Coming back to the position of the Gnostics (denying the deity of Jesus), we can be assured of the historical accuracy of the events, because they are attested to by faithful witnesses "...*And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world...*" (1:4:14 NIV). In this case, the witness comes from the apostles. But, as witnesses to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, the first century christians also have the same assurance. And when we read the testimony and accounts of the first century writers, and let God's Spirit work with our spirit, and put on the same kind of love that God has shown to us, then as 21<sup>st</sup> century christians, we can also see Jesus as the Saviour of the world.

The test for the false teachers (in this case the Gnostics) is whether they truly acknowledge Jesus' deity "...*Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God...*" (1:4:15 NKJV). The ultimate conclusion from this is that we therefore must serve God in truth "...*And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him...*" (1:4:16 NIV).

## **Love is the Outcome, not Fear**

John returns again to one of the outcomes of our faith – what will we do when we meet God on the day of judgement? The Jews had such a fear and reverence for God that they would not even say His name. It is for this reason, that no-one is quite sure exactly how to pronounce the name YHWY (usually pronounced Yarway, and translated Jehovah). We are all sinners, and must all give account to God for our sins. When we stand before Him, we have every reason to be afraid and concerned as to what God will say to us. But rather than fear, we should have the confidence to approach Him, because through *agape* love we exhibit the characteristics that God wants us to have, and become the people that He wants us to be. “...*In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him.* <sup>18</sup>*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love...*” (1:4:17-18 NIV).

## **Conclusion on Love**

In summarizing the command to love one's brother, John begins with his most important truth. Love must never be conceived of as a "natural" experience of the natural man. There is a "natural" love, but it must not be confused with divine love (*agape*; GK G27). The love John speaks of originates with the Father, became manifest in and through the Son, and now characterizes the life of the children of God. (NIVBC)

“... *We love because he first loved us.* <sup>20</sup>*If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.* <sup>21</sup>*And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother...*” (1:4:19-21 NIV). *Agape* love towards God cannot exist unless we demonstrate it in our loves by the love of our brethren. If we fail to show our love to our visible brethren, then we cannot claim to have the same kind of love for the invisible God.