

*April 29, 2018*

*I John 4:1-11:*

## ***“Test the Spirits”***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
2155 North Oakland Avenue  
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Unbridled hostility against Jesus and those who believe in him is growing rapidly through out the this unbelieving world. It would not be a difficult thing to marshal an enormous amount of evidence to support what I have just said, but we will save that for another time. For now, I would much rather quote the words of Jesus after he talks to his disciples about the hostility toward him and us: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world (John 16:33)."

We are not surprised that these things are happening, or at least we shouldn't be, for the Scripture is full of warnings about these things. Take for example the words of Jesus when he says, "you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved (Matthew 10:22)." The name of Jesus is everything revealed about his person and work in the Scripture. And, his name has been placed upon us in our Baptisms. Jesus has touched us with his identity. Insofar as we die and rise with him and remain in his name - the word and sacraments - we are his and identified with him. Therefore, we can expect to follow in his very footsteps now and forever. May our Savior grant us the strength to endure and share in his victory!

For the Biblical Christian, who has been convicted of sin and mercifully brought to the amazing love of Jesus in the forgiveness of sin and with that the great anticipation of eternal life, it can be terribly heartbreaking to realize that so many would like for Jesus and us to simply disappear. Many believe that this would open the doors to a truly better society - even a sort of heaven on earth - or on another planet when this one finally wears out. Indeed! It is hard to hear the voice of the good shepherd in the Scripture, to be set free from sin and death, only to realize that many do not want the same precious treasure that we so desperately want to confess. Perhaps we may ask "why are we so hated?" The answer is the same reason that Jesus gave for his own rejection: because he testifies about it [this unbelieving world], "that its works are evil (John 7:7)." And people, by their fallen nature, love to do evil, for such labor is easy.

We know that without a recognition of our sin there is no need for Jesus, and so we proclaim the truths of sin and grace only find ourselves headed to a crucifixion along with the one who died for us. Those who love their sin and who wish to cling to their sinful desires will not have anyone wrecking their good times down here with a cry to die to sin, rise with Jesus, and live in self-denial. May God grant us the strength to pick up our cross and follow him "daily" as it says in the gospel of Luke (Luke 9:23)! It is certainly not an easy cross to bear - to die to sin every single day with Jesus, to rise with him unto newness of life, and then to deny ourselves for the kingdom that is of another place and confess it.

Now, if it isn't enough that so many on the outside sincerely and passionately hate us as they hated Jesus, we also find from Scripture that we are required to contend with false teaching and false teachers in the church. The church is no easy place to dwell. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 16:17-20:

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve

our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

It is really hard to believe that some Christians get downright upset when you talk about false teaching, false teachers, and churches that tolerate lies. Name them outright and some get outraged. Paul says we are to avoid them. Those are pretty tough words for some. But, the Scripture is full of such warnings. One would be hard pressed to find a book in the new testament that doesn't warn us. Please allow me to set one more passage in front of you, this time from the second epistle of John:

Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works (2 John 8-11).

Perhaps this was a long route to get to our epistle lesson for this morning, but as I "surveyed the land," so to speak, it seemed to be a smooth way to approach our lesson. John writes, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but **test the spirits** to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." And the unbelieving world makes its way into the church. True children of God believe the truth and love one another - they care for one another and demonstrate this care by pursuing and maintaining truth. They also confess it to everyone who will listen, but they will not allow lies to drag them away from Jesus and all that he gives. Consequently, they must **test the spirits** of people who would desire to influence them spiritually, whether such are on the outside or inside of the church.

Those who would influence us spiritually from the outside and those who would influence us spiritually within the church are to be tested. Simply believing everybody is a very dangerous thing. Christians dare not accept uncritically any and all "spirits." The question that naturally arises from all of this is "how do we **test the spirits**?" There is an on-going need for critical assessment of all who claim to have truth, or who claim to speak for God. Just because someone seems to be "smart" or has personal magnetism doesn't mean that they have our spiritual well-being in mind. We must critically examine all that we hear to see "whether they are from God" - or not. Again, how can we know the difference?

No one can possibly look into the heart and know. Still, John tells us that we can know. We can recognize truth from lie. Whatever we hear must be weighed against what we know from Scripture about the person and work of Jesus Christ. In other words, the Scripture must always be our guide. John reminds us of the importance to know the apostolic word that speaks of the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Jesus when he writes: "We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood." Make no mistake about it, the apostle John does not speak on his own authority, but on by the authorization of Jesus Christ who spoke of the apostles and us in his high priestly prayer: "I do not ask for these only, but also

for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me (John 17).” And Paul writes in 2 Timothy 6:3-4, “If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.” And Jesus says, “You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles (Matthew 7:16)?”

As you can see, it is the duty of the Christian to know the teachings of God’s holy word and to be alert to what they observe. There isn’t any excuse not to wrestle with and grow in our faith. To neglect the truth is a very dangerous place to be. God’s people are glad to read and study the Scriptures which speak of the full truth about Jesus Christ. The people of God continually look into the law and gospel, live in a state of repentance, struggle and overcome sin, and confess his name to all who will listen - even at the price of being hated. The sheep listen to the voice of Jesus in the Scriptures. And, as John quotes Jesus in his gospel: “the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers (John 10:4-5).” Where we have failed, there is forgiveness and restoration, only now let us pursue what John encourages us to do.

One Lutheran pastor writes: “This, then, is how we can without a doubt recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood and determine which is at work in any particular preacher or teacher. We examine the message to see if it is the full truth about Jesus Christ, and we consider the listeners to see if it is the people of this unbelieving world or people of God.” **Test the spirits.** We do so to preserve ourselves and out of love for others. In this way, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who lived a perfect life and suffered and died for our sins, we overcome this unbelieving world just as Jesus overcame. John writes: “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” Again, in the words of the same Lutheran pastor, “What a world of comfort for weary sinners, worn by their weaknesses and warring against Satan, lies in these words. The Spirit, who speaks the Word, by that same Word dwells in us, and thus we, too, are greater than the world.”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott