Excerpts from Life-Study of 1 John, Message 30
PROVING THE SPIRITS (1)

Bible Verses:

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but prove the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

2 In this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God,

3 And every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have

heard that it is coming and now is already in the world.

In this message we come to 4:1-6. These verses stand as a particular section. Apparently this section has nothing to do with either the preceding section or the following section. As we have seen, the preceding section is concerned with loving the brothers. The following section returns to the matter of loving the brothers. Therefore, 4:1-6 stands between two sections concerned with loving the brothers. We may wonder, then, how 4:1-6 is related to these sections.

I believe 4:1-6 is inserted for at least two reasons. The first reason is related to our need to discern the spirits. In 3:24 John speaks of the "Spirit whom He gave to us." Because the Spirit is mentioned here, John goes on to the matter of discerning, proving, trying, the spirits. There is more than one kind of spirit in the universe.

Hence, we need John's warning to prove the spirits.

First John 4:1-6 is a parenthetical section warning the believers to discern the spirits that they may recognize the false prophets. This warning is related to the mention of the Spirit in the preceding verse, 3:24, the Spirit whereby we know that the Lord abides in us. A similar warning was given in 2:18-23. The expressions "every spirit" and "the spirits" in 4:1 refer either to the spirits of the prophets (1 Cor. 14:32) motivated by the Spirit of truth, or to the spirit of the false prophets actuated by the spirit of deception. Hence, there is the need to discern the spirits by proving them to see whether they have their source out of God. This is the reason John says in verse 1, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but prove the spirits whether they are out of God." To prove the spirits is to discern them (1 Cor. 12:10) by putting them on trial.

I believe that a second reason for John's inserting 4:1-6 is to warn the believers that although we need to love the brothers, we should not receive false prophets and antichrists. We should love all men, including our enemies. However, we cannot receive a false prophet or an antichrist.

In the early years of my ministry, we found it necessary to inoculate the saints against modernism. A number of professors and others in the universities had been influenced by modernistic teachings concerning Christ and the Bible. The modernists taught that Christ is not God, that He was an illegitimate son of Mary with Joseph, that He was a great philosopher, and that He died on the cross not for redemption but as a martyr. Furthermore, the modernists did not believe in the Bible. In particular, they did not believe in the miracles recorded in the Scriptures.

When we stood up to oppose modernism, some friends said to us, "Shouldn't we love them?

Shouldn't we receive them?" We, however, practiced John's word in his second Epistle: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not say to him, Rejoice!" (v. 10). To love a person is one thing, but to receive one who is a false prophet or an antichrist is an altogether different thing.

John realized that it was necessary for him, when speaking about loving the brothers, to say a word regarding false prophets and antichrists. We must prove the spirits and stay away from the false prophets. Although we need to love the brothers and even all men, we should never receive a false prophet or an antichrist.

At this point we need to consider further the meaning of the word "antichrist." In Matthew 24:5 the Lord Jesus says, "For many shall come in My name, saying, I am the Christ, and they shall lead many astray." This verse speaks of a false Christ,

someone who pretends to be Christ, in order to lead the believers astray.

In 1 John there are three verses concerning the antichrist. In 2:18 John says, "Young children, it is the last hour, and even as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come; whereby we know that it is the last hour." Notice that in this verse the definite article is not used before "antichrist." John simply says that the believers heard that antichrist is coming and then goes on to say that many antichrists have come.

But due to traditional teachings, many Christians have the concept that only one person will be the antichrist.

Bible teachers often speak about the antichrist, giving the impression that antichrist is a proper noun referring only to one person. However, according to John's use of this term in 2:18, 22; 4:3; and 2 John 7, this is a general title, a title referring to a category of persons. It is not a unique, proper title referring to one particular person. Therefore,

the title "antichrist" is different from the title "Christ," for there is only one Christ and anyone who claims to be Christ is either a false Christ or an antichrist. But we should not use the word antichrist as if it were a proper noun.

It is not scriptural to say that there will be only one antichrist. But it is also wrong to say that the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction who exalts himself above all that is called God, is not an antichrist. That person should definitely be regarded as an antichrist.

Read the verses and footnotes online: https://text.recoveryversion.bible
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Note: This version is not intended to be printed as material for pursuit during the small group gathering. Instead, it is to be used as additional reference for brothers and sisters who want to prepare in advance for fellowship on the message. We include here notes from the commentaries of the brothers in the life-study radio program. The points from these commentaries can help enrich our understanding and, eventually, our fellowship with the saints on the selected portions of the life-study message. We still recommend that, if possible, the saints still listen to the audio message in addition to reading the life-study message for personal pursuit and for preparation for small group gatherings. We also wish to point out that these notes have not been fully polished.

[Commentary]:

Introduction

[MM:] The Apostle John gave us a long word in his first epistle about loving the brothers. But right in the middle of his fellowship about love, he inserts six verses in chapter 4 that start out, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but prove the spirits whether they are of God." This is Matt Miller with Bob Danker. We have an enlightening program today that makes the connection between loving the brothers and proving the spirits. Bob, thanks for joining me today.

[BD:] It's always a pleasure, Matt.

[MM:] You know, Bob, I think many readers of the Bible just take for granted the placement of verses. And they don't really consider the Spirit's leading of the Apostle John as he wrote these things. I mean there's a thought in John that's been led by the Spirit to come up with this placement. I know for example, myself, I just take it for granted. Until today, I didn't really see the connection that we're gonna see in this program.

[BD:] Yup, Matt. Throughout this Epistle, John has emphasized this matter of the "eternal life", and the fellowship of this eternal life. And if we live in this fellowship, then we… of course, we will love the brothers, we will practice righteousness, we will not live a lawless life. But actually, until chapter 3 verse 24, John had not directly mentioned the Spirit in his Epistle. But eventually, the very last verse of chapter 3… he says, "And in this we know that He abides in us by the Spirit whom He gave to us."

Well, here, John mentions the Spirit explicitly for the first time. Although the Spirit is implied in the anointing, which John mentions in chapter 2… but it's not mentioned explicitly until the end of chapter 3. And actually, if we consider the fact that the Spirit is really the crucial and vital factor of all the mysteries — the mysterious things that John speaks about in John's book. Without the Spirit, we could not receive the eternal life, and we could not participate in the fellowship of the eternal life. So the Spirit is a crucial factor in our experience of the divine life and the fellowship of that life and our living by that life to express God, in the life of righteousness and loving the brothers, and so forth.

So when John mentions, "the Spirit of God", for the first time in the book, then he turns immediately in the first part of chapter 4, as you've pointed out, to warn the believers that there's not only one Spirit in this universe, that is the Spirit of God. There are other spirits as well, and we as the believers, in order to avoid being cheated and defrauded from the enjoyment of the eternal life as our portion in Christ, we have to be careful and we have to learn to discern these different spirits.

[MM:] Wait, Bob, I think there's a lot of light in this program. And I really hope our listeners would stay with us. I know it was helpful for me. I'm gonna take a bit of a longer time today to read these verses. It's chapter 4 verses 1 through 6. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but prove the spirits whether they are

of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. In this you know the Spirit of God, every Spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God. And every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it was coming, and now is already in the world. You are of God, little children, and you have overcome them because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are of the world, therefore they speak out of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us. He who is not of God does not hear us. From this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception. Here's Witness Lee for 1 John, Life Study message 30, that covers chapter 4 verses 1 through 6.

Part 1

[MM:] Bob, let's stop right here and get into these two reasons why the Apostle John inserted 6 verses on proving the spirits. There are other spirits right there, besides the Holy Spirit. And even though we love every one, we cannot take false prophets, can we?

[BD:] We cannot receive them. And this is a very important point in John's Epistles. Even in this second Epistle of John, he speaks again about these false prophets, who speaks heresies regarding the Person of Christ. And John said, we should not receive these people into our homes, and we should not even greet them. We should not say to them rejoice or give them a positive greeting. We should not have anything to do with these people, because what they are speaking is heretical concerning Christ's Person. And it is like a disease that can be communicated to us if we would receive them and their teachings.

So, John here is very concerned about the believers. In his Epistle, John, who was speaking by the Spirit of God, told the believers that Christ, who is the eternal life, who is the Word, who was in the very beginning… this Christ was God Himself became a man, and the Apostles heard Him… they saw Him with their eyes, they handled Him with their hands. In other words, Christ, as the eternal Word of God, who was God Himself, the very unique God in this universe, became a man, and He took on humanity and was even touchable. And then John said that it's this One that we announce to you… We report to you what we've seen and heard.. And those who receive the report of the true apostles, the real prophets who speak by the Spirit of God, who speak truth by God's Spirit, they receive the divine life, and they enter into all the enjoyment of the riches of this divine life. It all depends on their receiving the apostles' report concerning Christ as the God-man, the One who is the complete God and the perfect man.

But there are others out there whom John says are false prophets, they speak not by God's Spirit, but by another spirit, the spirit of deception, who really is Satan himself. So these false prophets are motivated by the spirit of deception which is Satan to speak lies and heresies concerning Christ's Person, so that he would lead men away from Christ, from the enjoyment of the divine life. If we receive these persons, these heretical teachers, then we will receive their heretical teaching, and we would be cheated and robbed from the real enjoyment of the divine life. And John is very concerned for all the believers that they would, in a sense, be inoculated… they would be warned and be on the alert that there are people who are going about spreading heretical teachings concerning the Person of Christ.

[MM:] Well, John gave this word to inoculate the early believers, and not just them but us today. And we're repeating that warning. We need to know Christ as the complete God and the perfect man. Let's go back to Witness Lee as we continue with this matter.

Part 2

[MM:] Well, Bob, that was a pretty strong word… that a number of the nominal Christians are antichrist. We're gonna spend our entire next program on the principle of antichrist. And I think that that will be an eye opener for many of our listeners, just like this word we just heard. It may be an eye opener that many of the nominal Christians are antichrist.

[BD:] Yes, Matt. A nominal Christian is a person who claims to be a Christian but does not believe that Jesus, the man born of the virgin, Mary, is actually God Himself who became a man through incarnation. They don't believe, they don't hold the orthodox and proper teaching concerning Christ. They believe something else about Christ — either that He wasn't really God, not the unique God who created the universe… "He wasn't that God.. Maybe He was some other kind of God, but He's not the unique God, or He is not Jehovah, God of the Old Testament." Jesus is Jehovah. Jesus is that very God of the Old Testament who was incarnated to be a man. We shouldn't believe anything else about Jesus.

There are people, even today who claim to be Christian, but they are not real believers in Christ, they don't believe, they don't hold the orthodox faith in Christ. And yet they go around talking about their improper belief concerning Christ. They spread their heretical teachings. They may even come to your door. John spoke about this in his second Epistle, "Don't receive these persons into your home." Don't let them into your home. And don't even greet them with a positive greeting because John said in the second Epistle, if we do this, if we receive them, or we greet them, he says, "we share in their evil works". John was so strong in telling us we should separate ourselves from such persons and not allow them and their heretical teachings to come into our home, into our mind, into our being. We should reject them absolutely. And we should hold to the proper teaching that Jesus Christ is the very God Himself who became a man in the flesh, and who died on the cross to accomplish redemption.

You know, Witness Lee mentioned the "modernists", that they did not believe that Jesus's death was for redemption. They thought He was just a martyr, being put on the cross by people who hated Him, and He suffered a martyr's death. But actually the Bible teaches that Christ in His death was our Redeemer. He was accomplishing a great redemption for us and for all things, so that we by believing in Him could receive the eternal life. We could receive Him, the very Christ who was crucified and was resurrected. We receive this One as the eternal life. This all depends on our holding to the proper and orthodox teaching concerning the Person of Christ, who is Jesus Christ. Is He only a man? Or is He only God? Not a man? Is He a man and not God? Is He God and not a man? No! He's both! He's God and man mingled together as one Person. This is a great truth, and is a great heresy to teach anything else.

[MM:] You've called this earlier, Bob, an inoculation, and I thought that is your speaking. It's like why would we be surprised today when someone comes to our door with another message? We were warned it's gonna happen. And even in 1John chapter 2 verse 18 he said, "Even now, many antichrists have come." This is in 995 A.D., the end of the first century, and already they were waiting for antichrist to come, thinking it's an individual, but John said many antichrists have come. So it's not just that one man of sin will come. It's not just that there would be the antichrist, but there are many antichrists already. Well there's a lot here, Bob. We better go on to the conclusion of today Life Study.

Part 3

[MM:] Bob, I wanna read the verse about the man of sin that Witness Lee just referred to in 2 Thessalonians, and then I'll let you make the final comments. It's in chapter 2 verses 3 and 4, "Let no one deceive you in any way, because it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposed and exalts himself above all that is called god

or an object of worship, so that he sits on the temple of God, setting himself forth, saying that he is god. Bob, your final comments.

[BD:] Of course, Matt, in the verses that you read, they speak about the man of lawlessness. And most Christians would say this is the antichrist, referring to an individual person who is expected to come according to Paul's description here. We call him the antichrist. Although in the Scriptures, he's not called the antichrist. but John here, in his Epistles, as 1 and 2 John mentions, "antichrists". Many antichrists. So he's not speaking about this one unique individual person. John is speaking about those many false prophets who claim to be speaking for God but actually motivated by Satan the spirit of error.

You know, the Spirit of God who is the Spirit of truth motivates all the genuine believers in Christ to preach the gospel and speak the truth concerning the Person of Christ. And whenever we hear this kind of speaking, we should receive it, because it comes from the Spirit of God. But then there's another spirit in the universe which is Satan himself. This spirit is the spirit of deception. He's a deceiver, a deceiving spirit. And he motivates others who are not genuine believers in Christ, but who present themselves as Christians in name, to go about to spread the heresies concerning the Person of Christ to lead people astray and to infect them with a kind of infectious disease, which is their heresies that they are spreading. If… these kinds of people, we should definitely not receive. We should not listen to them. We should not invite them into our homes. We should not greet them and tell them "have a nice day". We should not in any way participate in their evil work of spreading the heretical teaching concerning Christ. W we should proclaim the truth, the real gospel, that Jesus Christ is God who became a man, and who died on the cross to accomplish our redemption, so that we by believing in Him might have the eternal life of God. This is the truth. This is what the Spirit of God would motivate us to declare.

[MM:] Bob, I've heard it said once, describing the condition of we, Christians, today, that we are mostly a hundred miles wide, and only half an inch deep. But I feel like today's program, we took a dive. We broke up into the ice, and we took a dive into the depths of this truth. And this isn't a shallow thing. I really appreciate you coming and being with me for this program today.

[BD:] I'm very happy I could be with you, Matt.