THE ONE IN YOU IS GREATER

1 John 4:1-6

Key Verse: 4:4

“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.”

In the last lesson, we learned that we can have confidence before God when we obey Jesus’ command of love through faith in Jesus Christ who laid down his life for us. This confidence is God living in us by the Spirit through our obedience to his command. Today’s passage is peculiar in that it commands us to test the sprits. The word “spirit” or “spirits” is written 8 times. Spirits are invisible but working powerfully in the world throughout generations. Spirit matters in life and in the world. One big part of Christian life is to test or discern the spirits, which requires spiritual struggle. As an old man is ready to leave this world, Apostle John exhorts his dear children remaining in the world to test the spirits so that they may not be gullible but truly discerning and become overcomers in the spiritual warfare. Let’s study this passage with the title, “The one in you is greater.”

**First, the testing of the spirits (1-3).** Verse 1 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.” People wonder why there are so many religions and many ideas and teachings about how to live in the world. Many think that all are fundamentally the same and the “united way” is popular in our time of pluralism and diversity. However, Christians should clearly know the difference and be certain of their belief amid many false prophets and false teachings. It is good to remember that false teaching began from the Garden of Eden. The devil tempted the woman, Eve, to doubt the word of God and distort it and finally deny the word. In other words, he “deceived” her. In Deuteronomy, Moses warns his people about a prophet who preached rebellion against the LORD their God, trying to turn them from the way the LORD had commanded them to follow (Dt. 13:1-5). Apostle Peter said in 2 Peter 2:1, “But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.” And Peter continued in verse 2, “Many will follow their sensuality. Because of them the way of the truth will be maligned.” Peter devotes one whol chapter to talk about false teachers in 2 Peter 2. Apostle Paul said to the elders of the Ephesian church in Acts 20:30-31, “Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard.” And Paul said to his spiritual son in 1 Timothy 6:20, “Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care” and in 2 Timothy 1:14, “Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.” And Jude 3 says, “Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” As we studied in 1 John, Apostle John repeatedly told about the falsity or counterfeit. He said in 2:18-19, “Dear children, this is the last hour and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.” And he said in 2:26, “I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray”, and in 3:7, “Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray.” Here John clearly mentioned that many false prophets had gone out into the world.

Then verse 2 says, “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.” “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” This can be the succinct essence of Christianity. Let’s think about this. It does not say, “Jesus has come in the flesh.” Rather, it says, “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” Jesus is the name given before his birth. Christ is the “Anointed One”, related to the Son of God (Jn 20:31). The human Jesus and the eternal Christ. Yet, Jesus Christ is one person with two natures, the nature of God and the nature of man. He is the God-man. 1 John 1:1 says “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.” Jesus Christ was from the beginning, before the creation of the world. He is God Incarnate. Coming in flesh, he dwelt among men. How he lived on earth is always a mystery. When he taught, people were amazed at his teaching, saying, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!” (Mk 1:17) He healed the sick with various diseases, those suffering sever pain, those having seizures, the paralyzed, men with leprosy, etc. He opened the eyes of the blind. He made the deaf hear and the mute speak and the lame walk. He drove demons out of men. He raised the dead. When he raised a dead young man from his coffin, the people present were all filled with awe and praised God, saying, “God has come to help his people” (Lk 7:16). He calmed the storm. He fed five thousand with five loves and two fish. He walked on the water. He lived with his unruly twelve disciples. They saw his glory, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). They would be raised as matchless men of God throughout his history. Coming in flesh, he was also limited by time and space. He had to stay in the land of Judea and Galilee. He was hungry and tired, so had to eat and rest and sleep. He lived a holy life keeping all the laws of God. When he lived a perfect holy sacrificial life, revealing God’s mercy and grace and truth and urging people to repent, he was hated by the world, particularly the established religious leaders. In their extreme hatred they handed him over Romans to be crucified. That night in his human nature he had to pray, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Lk 22:42). He prayed earnestly until his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. Then he was crucified on the cross in full obedience to God. He died the most cruel, the most painful, the most unjust death in the greatest agony men ever could experience. In such a death, God’s long planned will was fulfilled at last. This was the death of the Son of God, God-man. This is the ultimate purpose of God’s coming in the flesh. Hebrews 2:9 says, “he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” And according to Hebrews 2:10 God made the author of our salvation perfect through suffering. Once made perfect, he came the source of eternal salvation (5:9). The writer of Hebrew further wrote in 9:12, “…He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption,” in 10:10, “by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” and in 10:14, “by one sacrifice (for all time) he has made perfect those who are being made holy.” According to John, “He is the atoning sacrifice/propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” And he was raised from the dead with his glorious resurrection body. Through his resurrection he proved that he is indeed the Son of God, and so he is the Lord (Ro 1:4). When he appears, we shall be like him with our lowly bodies becoming like his glorious body (1 Jn 3:3; Phil 3:1). So Jesus Christ’s coming in the flesh, what an unfathomable wisdom! He is the wisdom of God. He is wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1 Cor 1:30).

Look at verse 2 again. “…Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” Here the word “acknowledge” is in Greek *homologeó*. It is in other versions translated “to confess.” Confession requires commitment. Romans 10:9 says, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” As for the early Christians, making such a confession was life-risking, because the Roman world demanded that only Caesar is the Lord. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:3, “…no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” So “every spirit that acknowledges/confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” When we consider all these, what a fitting statement it is to test the spirits and recognize the Spirit of God!

Then verse 3 says, “but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.” In the new KJV, it says, “every spirit that does not acknowledge that Jesus has come in the flesh is not from God.” Apostle Paul said in Galatians 2:21, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.” It is totally unthinkable and frightening that Christ died for nothing. Paul was so painful to see many who live as enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil 3:19). Verse 3 continues, “This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.” John had written in 2:22, “Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son.” Also 2 John 7 says, “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.”

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1, “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosophers of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” And then Paul continued, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” The wisdom of the world cannot know and acknowledge Jesus Christ and him crucified. Paul continued in 1 Corinthians 2, “…no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us” (2:11-12). The spirit of the world that incudes the wisdom of the world cannot know what God has freely given us.

As we studied in James 3:15, 17, “Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil” and “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure…” there are only two kinds of wisdom: of the devil or from heaven/God. We are to know that anything other than the truth, apart from the Spirit of God, any ideology, any philosophy, any theory, any viewpoint, any religion other than the truth is demonic. Certainly, pseudo-Christianity is demonic.

Without acknowledging Jesus, no one can come to God the Father. Jesus himself made it crystal clear. He said in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus Christ coming in the flesh is the only way to God and the only way for the salvation of mankind. May we really discern the Spirit of God and the spirit of the world, that is, the spirit of the antichrist.

**Second, how to overcome (4-6).** Verse 4 says, “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.” Here those who are from God are children of God. John had stated in 3:1, “How great is the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” God’s great love is that he did not spare his own Son but gave him up for our salvation. Through the incarnation, God becomes a partaker of human nature. In regeneration, man becomes a partaker of the divine nature. Those regenerated people are Children of God. God’s children have the Spirit of God in them, God lives in each of his children by the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:12 says, “Those are led by the Spirit are sons of God.” And Jesus said in John 10:29, “My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all…” It is absolutely true that the Spirit of God is greater than the spirit of the world. So those children of God who are sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and live by the Spirit can discern the spirit of the world, its deception and falsity and overcome it.

The word “overcome” in Greek, *nikaó*, seems to be one of John’s favourites in his writing. John says in 5:4-5, “Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” He also wrote in 2:13, “I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one” and again in 2:14, “I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.” In John’s gospel, at the end of the upper room dialogue with his disciples Jesus said in 16:33, “…take heart! I have overcome the world.” In Revelation, Jesus gave a specific promise to the overcomes of each church. And then it is written in 21:7, “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”

Jesus said to his disciples in John 15:19, “…I have chosen you out of the world.” And we remember Jesus’ prayer for his disciples in John 17:15-16, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.” God’s children are to live in the world but they are not of the world. In Revelation, John heard one angel coming down from heaven saying, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!” then he heard another voice from heaven, “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.” (18:2, 4). The point is that the Spirit of God and the spirit of the world cannot mingle together. God’s children are not to be under the rule of the spirit of the world. So 1 John 2:15 says, “Do not love the world or anything in the world…”

We can think of the life of Daniel. In his young age he was transported to Babylon. He lived in Babylon through his entire life, yet he was not of Babylon. He was not under the spirit of Babylon. Rather he greatly influenced the Babylonian empire and kings. His life of faith in that kingdom began this way. As a young boy, he had an opportunity to be educated in the palace with other Jewish young boys who could be future leaders. They were given a lot of privileges including enjoying gourmet food. But he resolved not to defile himself with royal food and wine (Da 1:8). No one cared about it, but he made such a personal decision before God. God accepted it and blessed him with knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning, including visions and dreams of all kinds. Later on, on one occasion, he was in a situation with other wisemen of Babylon to be put to death, because none of them was able to tell and interpret the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar. At that time, Daniel’s fellowship with God was very intimate and God revealed the interpretation of the dream to Daniel. Also, Daniel had his friends with whom he could pray together in such a situation. When Daniel could tell and interpret the king’s dream, the king fell prostate before Daniel and paid him honour, saying, “Surely your God is the God of gods and the lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery” (Da 2:47). Another time Daniel’s three friends were thrown into the blazing furnace when they refused to worship the image the king set up. However, God protected them completely in the burning furnace without even one hair of their heads singed. Then, the king, in awe and amazement, praised and proclaimed their God as the true one in his whole empire (Da 3:28). Still, another time, Daniel was thrown in the lions’ den because of the false accusation by his political rivals under a king of the Medes and Persians. Certainly, God protected him absolutely. Then the king Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations and men of every language throughout the land: “I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and revere the God of Daniel….” (6:26). When we think of Daniel’s life of faith, one secret was that he prayed three times a day (6:10), even in his public life with much work to do in a position next to the kingdom. As we ponder on Daniel and his three friends, they were in the world but not of the world, rather influenced the kingdoms of the world. They were great people of God, but it was the one who was in them that enabled them to overcome the spirit of the kingdoms of the world. When we think of Apostle John, as we studied in Revelation he was exiled to the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. Yet, he was not crushed by the power of the world, the Roman world of that time. Rather, there he saw a vision of God and wrote Revelation, through which he could influence the whole coming world to the end of the age. He testifies to all the children of God that the one who is in them is greater than the one who is in the world. May we firmly believe this and live a life of faith in this global world, clearly seeing that the prince of the world or the ruler of the world is Satan (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), the devil, who deceives the whole world (Rev 12:9), and the whole world under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19).

Let’s look at verse 5. “They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world and the world listens to them.” We all know the importance of one’s viewpoint. The viewpoint of the world and the viewpoint of God are quite different. One clear difference is this: the viewpoint of the world speaks that the world will be better and better with globalization and the great advantages of technology. They claim that being liberal is being progressive and human history has been progressive. They try to give hope to the people of the world. Outwardly, it seems to be nice and attractive. But in reality, it is not so. Moral revolution sounds great, but it means morality is gone. People’s concept of good and evil is completely changed with the truth being thrown down to the ground (Isa 5:20; Da 8:12). One prominent pastor’s recent message entitled “When government rewards evil but punishes good” well depicts the present time. The world is not being progressive but regressive. The world will become worse and worse because people’s hearts become more and more evil and hostile toward God and true believers. It will be so until the Lord Christ Jesus comes again. We should know that those who believe the truth are a small part of the population of the world. The vast majority of the world is swept away in false teaching, because they’re of the same ilk. They recognize their own language. Sinners have an affinity for error. Sinners have affinities for demons, seducing spirits, hypocritical lies because they have no apparatus for the truth. The world is literally drowning in a sea of demonic lies. In that world phenomena, God’s work is to save souls, one more soul after another in any given situation, raising our children and God’s flock of sheep to be strong men and women of God who can withstand our time, believing that the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ (Rev 11:15).

Look at verse 6. “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.” In this part we see the words, “you” “the world” and “we.” Who are “we”? John wrote in 1 John 1:1-3, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” In these three verses at the beginning of this epistle, the word “we”, “our” or “us” is written 12 times. In this context, they are those who directly experienced the historical Jesus with their physical eyes and ears and hands. They were apostles of Jesus Christ. Their testimony is of paramount importance in our Christian faith. The New Testament books are their writings. According to Ephesians 2:20, Christian church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” We learn from Bereans about whom is written in Acts 17:11, “they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” As for us, the Bible is the canon to examine whether what we heard is true.

Verse 6b says, “This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.” In human history, the battle that has been going on is the battle between the Spirit of God and the spirit of Satan, that is, the spirit of the world. We can also say that this battle is the between the Spirit of truth and the sprit of falsehood. This is a spiritual battle. This is beyond human battle. Deeply admitting this spiritual reality, may we all the more devote ourselves to Bible study and prayer, knowing that the battle for truth is the most important battle.

Thank God for the command, “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” Thank God that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. Thank God that the one who is in us greater than the one who is in the world. When we carefully, sensitively, prayerfully and confidently follow the leading of the Spirit of God is us, we will not be misled but walk on the path of truth, winning each battle over the spirit of the world.