



# International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

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## **1 John 4:1-6 Commentary New Revised Standard Version**

**Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse [International Bible Study Commentary](#). **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Study Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Study Forum](#).

**(1 John 4:1) 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.**

The Bible and the Gospel and the Letters of John assure everyone that in this world people will encounter spirits. If a believer encounters a spirit, John tells his readers how to test to see if the spirit is from God or not from God. Evil spirits can influence or indwell those of the world to mislead them and to mislead others with false teachings. Whether seen with the human eye or not, evil spirits can directly and indirectly influence a follower of Jesus Christ to believe in falsehoods or do something wrong, so what they communicate must be tested, but an evil spirit cannot indwell or possess a follower of Jesus Christ, for a follower of Christ has received the Holy Spirit. Sometimes a believer in Jesus may think a thought and wonder how it came into their minds. John tells his readers not to believe every spirit or trust every thought that comes into their minds or that someone suggests without testing the spirits or thoughts to see if they are from God. Most notably, John mentions prophets and warns believers that *many* false prophets have gone out into the world and these prophets will claim that

what they are teaching or directing people to do is from God. Once again, John tells us to test the spirits to see if they are from God. For example, a false spirit can influence or indwell a false prophet to sow seeds of doubt about the reliability of the Bible, the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, and the promises of God. John also gives his readers some ways to test the spirits and those who claim to be true prophets of God but are not.

**(1 John 4:2) By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,**

The followers of Jesus Christ have received the Spirit of God who indwells them. They receive their knowledge and understanding of the Bible and the teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles from the Spirit of God who gives them understanding directly from within them and indirectly through God's messengers, such as evangelists, preachers, and teachers who truly teach the Bible. The Spirit of God can give truths and ideas to believers that directly apply to their situation in life, but the Holy Spirit will never tell anyone to doubt the Bible or Jesus or the apostles' teachings. Rather, the Holy Spirit will help the followers of Jesus Christ better understand and apply the teachings of the Bible and empower them to love God and obey the commandments of Jesus in any situation. The Spirit of God will never advise or lead anyone to disobey God's revealed will in the Bible, but the Holy Spirit will lead and teach believers how to love God, their neighbors, and even their enemies as Jesus commanded. The Spirit of God will work through the gifts that God has given the Church as Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:11-13, "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." In John's day and our day, the ultimate test of a spirit regards what they say about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Does the spirit teach what the Bible teaches about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit? A false spirit will not confess that God the Father sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, into the world in human flesh, and this denial has taken many forms throughout the subsequent centuries. In the days of John and Paul, those called Gnostics

denied that Jesus really suffered and died and rose again as a human being (in the flesh). In our day, many will teach that Jesus was only a human being and not the Person named Jesus who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and sent into the world by His heavenly Father. In our day, a false spirit, false prophet, or false teacher will deny the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of the apostles, and the teachings of the Bible that conflict with the type of worldly and unbiblical life they want to live, and they will teach others to disregard the Bible's teachings too. They will appeal to people's self-interest and selfishness instead of encouraging God-centeredness.

**(1 John 4:3) and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.**

Every spirit, every prophet, and every teacher that does not confess (they may craftily refuse to deny) that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, that does not confess that the Father sent His only Son Jesus into the world to save the world from sin, that does not confess that Jesus Christ gives eternal life to all who believe in Him and other truths about God the Father and Jesus that the Bible reveals to us are not from God. The spirit of the antichrist, the spirit of the one who lives in rebellion against Christ, will deny the truth and try to teach falsehoods designed to mislead the followers of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 24:5 and 24:11, Jesus warned: "For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many" and "Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many." The first followers of Jesus Christ did not have the Bible, especially the New Testament, as we have the Bible today. To avoid being misled by the antichrists, false prophets, and lying spirits, believers need to continue studying the Bible and praying for the Holy Spirit to give them the understanding they need. Believers also need to obey the commands of God the Father and Jesus rather than do what the worldly would lead them to do. Resolving to believe in, love, and obey Jesus Christ will protect us from many of the devil's traps and help us better recognize and follow the Holy Spirit's teaching and leading in our lives. In Ephesians 6:10-20, Paul described and told believers to put on the whole armor. Remember especially Ephesians 6:11-10, "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the

devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

**(1 John 4:4) Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.**

Along with his warnings, John wanted to reassure the followers of Jesus. As followers of Jesus Christ, John says to believers, “Little children, you are from God.” In Ephesians 1:5-6, Paul expressed this truth when he wrote that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, “destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” The followers of Jesus Christ are temples of God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit indwell the followers of Jesus. For that reason, we have conquered the evil spirits that would mislead us, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 6:16, “What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’” God within us is greater than “the one who is in the world” (the evil spirit, the false prophet, or the antichrist). We can continue to conquer those who would mislead us as we prayerfully study the Bible with the intention of loving God more, obeying God consistently, and following Jesus more closely. Furthermore, believers know they have and will conquer evil spirits and worldly deceivers because our great God lives and rules over the entire universe from above and from within everyone who loves and follows Jesus.

**(1 John 4:5) They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them.**

Believers in Jesus will seek to follow Jesus, and John gives another test that believers can use when approached by false guides, false prophets, and false teachers. John notes especially that worldly leaders will say what is from the world. They are worldly; therefore, they can only lead people to do what those of this world want to do and want others to do too. Furthermore, the worldly will listen to false prophets and lying spirits and remain deceived.

The Holy Spirit will never lead a follower of Jesus Christ to do as the world does, and if we sense that type of leading, we know we are not being influenced by the Spirit of God for the Holy Spirit will always influence believers to obey the commands of God as revealed in the Bible.

**(1 John 4:6) We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.**

John insists that he and the apostles are from God, and their teaching is a revelation from God the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ. Those who know God listen to Jesus, John, and the apostles. Today, we would say, those who know God listen to what the Bible teaches, and by “listens” we mean “studies the Bible and believes and tries to obey all the truths they learn from the Bible as fast as they learn them.” Those who are not from God will not listen to Jesus’ teaching or obey Jesus’ teaching. They will say that they do not believe the Bible’s teachings. The Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, will affirm the teachings of the Bible and encourage others to believe and obey the Bible’s teachings, for the Bible is true, the Word of God written. The spirit of error, the spirits that would mislead us through false prophets and antichrists, will not listen to God, obey the commands of Jesus, or love God, others, and even their enemies. Those with the spirit of error *will not* listen to God or those from God. Remember: whoever knows God will listen to Jesus, John, and the other writers of the Bible, and they will encourage and teach others to listen to them too. Those who know God will especially listen to the New Testament, to the New Covenant that Jesus revealed and ratified with His own blood. They will learn more about God through Jesus, and love God more through Jesus, and obey Jesus better as their understanding of the will of God increases. In Hebrews 13:20-21, the writer to the Hebrews offers this prayer for every follower of Jesus Christ: “Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, *make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will,* working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

## Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Why did John say he wanted the followers of Jesus to test the spirits?
2. How can you tell the difference between a false spirit and the Spirit of God?
3. Who is the one who is in the believer and how can this encourage a believer in Jesus?
4. Who do those of the world listen to and why do they do so?
5. How do we know the difference between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error?

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