

## **1 John 4:1-11**

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho  
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Testing the Spirits, Confessing the Christ

The Word of the Lord from 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."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Test the spirits. That's the command which begins our epistle for today, and what is the test? It boils down to this: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God." To "confess" is to "say the same thing" that God says in His Word. The test of a teaching is what it says about Jesus, and whether or not it says the same thing as the Bible says. So what does it mean to confess Jesus Christ? Let's break that down a little bit.

To confess Jesus Christ correctly is to confess that He is "Jesus" and the "Christ." He is Jesus, the Savior. He's not the Lawgiver or the great winking Excuser of sin, but the Savior. Furthermore, He is the Christ; He is the One and only specifically anointed by God to be the Savior of the world. Others have claimed to be saviors, but only Jesus is the Christ, the chosen One of God. Now, the fact that Jesus is both the Savior and the Christ certainly leads us to His identity: He is God's Son. He's not just another ordinary human being, but the only-begotten Son of God – begotten of His Father from all eternity. He is God.

To confess Jesus Christ correctly is to confess that He is God.

But there's more to it. To confess Jesus Christ correctly is to confess that Jesus Christ "has come in the flesh." It is to confess He saved by being born of the Virgin Mary, by taking on human flesh just like yours and mine; that He saved by living a holy life; that He allowed His body to be nailed to a cross to die for the sins of the world. It is to confess that, three days later, He rose from the dead – body and all; and later, ascended into heaven – body and all. The eternal Son of God became man in order to save man from sin and death by His own life, death and resurrection.

Therefore, to confess Jesus Christ correctly is also to confess that He is man.

So there you go. To confess Jesus is to confess that He is both God and man who died for our salvation and rose again. Now, you may be thinking, "Well, of course. That's the same old stuff that we say in the creeds every week." Thanks be to God! This means that the faith you confess in those creeds is given to you by the Spirit of God. This means that you confess the Christian faith, because every false teaching goes after this truth.

One of the earliest heresies to attack the Church, and the one that St. John especially battled, was called Gnosticism. It taught that God could only be spirit because everything physical was evil; and if everything physical was evil, there was no way that the Son of God could possibly come in the flesh. Being holy, God wouldn't come near the earth but would stay as far away as possible. Jesus could only be spirit, not flesh – only God, not man. You see the danger, don't you? If Jesus were only spirit, then He didn't offer His body up on the cross for your sins.

Therefore, the price for your salvation hasn't been paid. And if He didn't pay it, then you have to pay it by your own works and labors: you save yourself, or else Judgment and hell await.

In case you're starting to yawn at ancient history, Gnosticism is thriving in our culture today so much that it is legislating how you live. Remember: at its root is the teaching that the spiritual is good and the physical is evil. Therefore, your body is evil and untrustworthy in Gnosticism, whereas your mind, soul and spirit are good. This religion lies at the root of the transgender movement today: advocates of transgender rights say that an individual's sex is not determined by one's body parts and DNA – rather, what the individual *believes* his sex to be is what matters. Meanwhile, God – if He's there at all – is a spirit so far away that He really has no opinion on the matter, other than to support your personal choice.

In New Testament times, Gnosticism wasn't the only false religion: Gentile cultures were full of pagan rituals. Such worshipers would be more than happy to acknowledge that Jesus was a man, even a very nice man who did good things before He was crucified. But the idea that He was also God just wouldn't compute. Do you see the danger? For one thing, if Jesus was just a nice guy, He didn't teach with authority and you could accept or reject His Word as you saw fit. Furthermore, if Jesus was just a nice guy who did good things and then died, then He didn't die for you; lots of nice guys have managed to do good things and die. But if Jesus was just one more in the string of nice guys, then the price for your salvation hasn't been paid. If the price hasn't been paid, then you have to pay it yourself by your works and labors, or else only Judgment and hell await.

Again, this isn't a false teaching left in the dust: instead, it now wears the disguise of liberal Christianity. You'll find many who say they believe in Jesus, but that Jesus was just a man who taught nice things before He died and is no longer with us – and where He allegedly taught disagreeable things, you're free to ignore Him because He was only human. That's how churches end up promoting whatever sinful trends are popular in society today, claiming it's what Jesus would do.

At any rate, the measure of any doctrine is what it says about Jesus: does it confess that He is the Son of God who came in the flesh to save or not? If it does, it is of God. If it doesn't, it is antichrist.

There are, of course, all sorts of variations. One religion in our neck of the woods teaches that Jesus is both human and divine, but the order is reversed: Jesus was first a man who became divine by his obedience and good works; and if you're obedient enough, you can become divine by your work too. It's an attractive teaching for many in this latter day.

Those false teachings will be popular, and our text tells us why: "They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error." The world is going to like other messages because it doesn't know God, and because those other messages don't require godly faith. As a Christian, it could get rather scary as you feel vastly outnumbered.

So what do you do? You hear the Word, and you hear this Word from your Savior: "Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." Christ has overcome the world. He has established His Church on His Word and promises that not even the gates of hell shall prevail against it. Having overcome the world by His death and resurrection, He shares that victory with you. As you confess Jesus Christ come in the flesh, you do so as one who has overcome the world because Jesus has made you His. And because He has made you His, you're far from alone or outnumbered. At the Supper soon to

come, you sing this faith with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven. And no less than Jesus Christ, come in the flesh, comes to you in bread and wine to give you forgiveness and life. He abides in you so that you might abide in Him. Forever.

Hearing that Word, you repeat it. You confess it. You tell others about it; not because you have to, but because there's no better thing to say. Really, there's news no more astonishing than that God loved the world so much that Jesus Christ came in flesh into the world to save. The world and sin and death have been overcome, and the Lord will use His Word proclaimed to save all who hear and deliver them out of this world.

Confessing His Word, of course you love one another. You sit next to your fellow members, fellow world-overcomers in Christ. As you gather here to receive God's grace, you encourage each other that you're not alone, because you are the body of Christ – of Jesus Christ come in the flesh. And you love each other in word and deed, because Jesus has set you free from every selfish sin that would keep you from doing so. You love each other because of the immense value that Jesus Christ has placed upon you, that He has come into the flesh to redeem you from sin.

So test the spirits, confess the Word and love one another; that's what you do. Why? Not because you save yourself, but because you have been saved. Hear from our text one more time: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

And God *does* so love us as to say that, for the sake of Jesus Christ come in the flesh, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen