

Preamble on John's writing style

John has this writing style that cycles around and around and around some core ideas. I was trying to think of an analogy to explain it. I think... 1 John is kind of like a croissant, I guess. The dough is rolled together and the butter is rolled out, and it's all folded together, and John's building these ideas up into this wonderful creation of a croissant that tastes so delicious, but you can't really perceive how it works. How do croissants even work? So yeah, that's kind of what's going on in 1 John.

I became a Christian in 2006, before the explosion of YouTube and Facebook, before smartphones, and just as Wikipedia was becoming the mainstream user-contributed source of information the internet. 20 years ago, the social internet was basically made up of blogs, forums and MSN messenger. It was a world where knowledge was still kept in books, not podcasts and videos and memes. Books. Remember those? As a really new Christian without a theological library, I was hungry to learn and grow and deepen in my love for Jesus, but I hadn't even yet bought a study Bible and I had So. Many. Questions. Alas, my friends and mentors couldn't give me discipleship 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, and I was insatiable.

One particular question had been nibbling away at me, one that I wasn't overly keen to ask my friends about because I didn't want to feel exposed, but I couldn't shake it – if I'm a Christian now, if I'm forgiven and I have the Holy Spirit and have this sense of joy, why do I still sin? When I said Yes to Jesus, I was saying no to sin... and yet... I was falling into wretched ways on a daily basis. How could this be? What could this mean?

So bashful and book-less, naturally I turned to the internet to seek some answers. You can guess where this is going...

Putting in my search terms, having a look around, I managed to find myself in a corner of the internet where someone was advocating Christian perfectionism, which while there are a few versions of it, in a nutshell it claims once you become a Christian you're incapable of sinning. They wrote clearly and authoritatively, they quoted the Bible, it seemed reasonable... and it also shook me to my core. The wonderful joy of forgiveness I knew was suddenly snatched from me, and I was left reeling. My fears were true. I was right not to ask my friends about this. I was a phony. According to this fellow I was back-and-forthing with, if I continued to sin, I wasn't a believer. It was devastating.

I sat with it for a few days. I didn't tell anyone. I didn't know what to do. But I felt the nudge of the Holy Spirit not to go back to that forum, and so I fessed up to a friend who took me to this very book, 1 John, chapter 1 verses 8 & 9:

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

In my eagerness to grow and learn about my new Christian faith, I had stumbled into the word of a false teacher, a false prophet, you could say, in the language of 1 John. Only through returning to the Word, hearing the testimony of believing friends, and having the Holy Spirit comfort my soul, was I able to overcome this challenge to my faith and be sure of the gospel.

This is the very thing that John is anxious to address as our passage today opens. “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.”

The context is that John is bishop over a whole bunch of churches in Asia Minor and this letter (which is more like a sermon really) went to the church in Ephesus and some other churches in the area. What was happening is false teachers, people that denied the reality of the gospel, had been coming in amongst them and sowing division and asking them to reject John's teaching and to reject those that John had sent to them. And John begins this passage saying there is actually a spiritual reality behind these people and their actions. False prophets have a false spirit behind them as they come into the church. So, the first thing I want us to consider is, how do we discern the spirits?

Discerning the Spirits

Ever since sin entered God's creation, we have been subject to challenges to God's truth. Genesis 3 verse 1, the very first conversation that isn't between God and humanity in the narrative of scripture begins with the serpent asking 'did God really say'... one verse in. Such is the world we live in, steeped in the tradition of challenging the very words of God time and time again. And so, John appeals to the church to be discerning. To test the words of those who have come into their fellowship, to test the spirits, because they are facilitating heresy.

It seems from 1 John 4 verse 2 that these false prophets deny that Jesus is God in the flesh, perhaps denying his death, or his humanity, or denying the resurrection. The gospel only works because Jesus the Messiah is God made flesh – living as one of us, dying as one of us, and being raised again in the flesh, the first of us who have eternal life. And so John rightly says that acknowledging this Jesus is a marker of the true spirit at work, the work of the Holy Spirit. Anyone who denies these truths is influenced by the spirit of the antichrist, that serpent, the devil, who is forever saying “did God really say”...

Be aware, be alert, because this spirit of untruth is at work in the world.

In John's day one challenge was the matter of Jesus Christ in the flesh, likewise in our day it could be this issue, or any number of worldly values that undermine or oppose the gospel.

- Wealth and good health – this one has been around for a long time
- Individualism and self-serving, rather than Christian fellowship and Christ-serving
- Jesus as one voice among many, merely a prophet, merely a wise rabbi, denying Jesus' divinity and overemphasising his humanity, so rejecting his message of salvation

- Self-improvement through traditional values rather than the radical transformation of our will, taking the shape to God's will by the work of the Spirit

This one's especially come to the fore in recent years with the rise of a particular man named Jordan Peterson. He is a psychology professor from Canada. And with the use of YouTube became quite a viral phenomenon in his secular sermons encouraging people to grow in maturity. And out of this, he wrote a book, 12 Rules for Life, and then the follow-up, another 12 Rules for Life. In recent years he has been spearheading a group called the ARC, or Alliance for Responsible Citizenship. And how they see their work as an alliance, as a collection of global conservative thinkers is to create a vision for a better world. And we all want that, right? That's great. A better world through right use of our resources, right relationships, good politics. And what ARC ultimately is doing is preaching a gospel of global improvement through self-improvement.

It's not the gospel.

It's *like* the gospel, and certainly Christians can be aligned to those values, but we need to be aware that we are actually listening to one who speaks words that sound good and true, but ultimately deny the truth of Jesus. It's definitely a challenge for us in today's day and age. And the spirits that are at work now are maybe things that we just don't recognise and we need help to see.

How can we be confident that we are listening to the right voices and following the truth? We might be anxious about that, but we have no need to be. Although we ought to be alert, in verse 4 John says not to be alarmed, as we "have overcome them". He's saying that the false prophets, the spirit of the antichrist has no power over us. There are two reasons for this, the first is that we are from God, and the second is because the one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world.

Both of those sound like a bit of Christian jargon, so let's pull them apart. Let's start with the second. The greater one within us. In the context of talking about the spirits, this is the Holy Spirit. How does the Holy Spirit help us overcome the power of the world and the devil? The first thing he does is helps us recognise truth. The Spirit knows the Father and the Son. God's truth is his truth because he is one with the Father and the Son. Together they are Trinity. Together they are God. The Spirit testifies to the truth of the gospel, he inspires the teaching of the apostles. This is why John says in verse 6 "We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us" because the apostles have seen and testify to the risen Lord Jesus, and the spirit confirms their testimony. And so with us, those who listen to the testimony of the apostles are also 'from God'. We have this lineage of truth from the Apostles because God's Spirit is working in us to see the truth.

I know that was a bit confusing – in summary, we have overcome the power of the world by listening to the Holy Spirit who is in us. When the world offers one testimony, we look to God's Word, and the Holy Spirit affirms for us the truth about Jesus.

This isn't to say that we can't be persuaded or drawn into believing lies, we can and do. All the time. And in fact, John's reason for writing is out of a concern for those who are believing every spirit, every false prophet, and being turned away from Christ. We can't pretend that this isn't a real threat for Christians. For example, our Christian bookstores are full of books about Christian living that are proclaiming a new idea, a new theory, a new approach to Christian life, but when you get below the surface it's simply worldliness dressed up with Christian language. But when these false prophets are tested against the truth of scripture, if we listen to the Holy Spirit, he will help us to discern the truth.

It's like we are rock climbers, scaling a cliff face, and we need to discern a safe path to the top. But we don't need to do it alone, and in fact we can't do it alone. The Word of truth is our harness and our support rope, and the Spirit is the one who is belaying, keeping the rope tight ensuring the harness can do its job. He has a perfect view of the cliff face and so helps us set out a safe path. Sometimes we might not listen, we might choose a crumbly piece of rock and slip, we might scramble ahead on a poor route making the rope slack and rendering the harness ineffective, but then find ourselves needing to backtrack or fall until the rope becomes tight again. And those moments are painful, and sometimes scary, but so long as we remain firmly within the harness and tethered to the rope, we're safe. It's not a perfect analogy, but you get what I mean. Hold firm to the truth about Jesus by knowing God's word, remain in the harness, and listen to the Spirit, who helps us navigate the world with that truth.

In one sense it's very simple... read the Word, be attuned to the Holy Spirit. But it takes work and intentionality to shut out the values, viewpoints and vices of the world. I was reflecting this week on how I respond to moments of crisis, and that question, it's scary just how good a diagnostic that thought process is. When you're feeling the heat, whether it's self-inflicted or whether it's the pressures of life, what do you default to? Do you listen to another story, a self-serving story perhaps, of self-justification over confession, of taking matters into your own hands instead of placing your trust in the Lordship of Christ and turning to prayer? Maybe it's turning to despair and looking for escapism. This week I was repeatedly shutting God out, telling myself and telling Him I wasn't emotionally ready to engage with him, that I had to get myself sorted, to prove myself to myself before I could come to God. That's a viewpoint from the world, and it's wild, because that's not at all what Jesus going to the cross meant for my relationship with him. He says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Not "come to me all you who have finally got your act together and we'll see how we go." The only one who has the power to grant me rest from my own mind is Jesus. So, I need to keep learning, practicing those spiritual disciplines of reading the Word and staying attuned to the Spirit, because his truth is far better than any other truth claims out there. We're all a work in progress.

And the wonderful thing about the Gospel is that God knows that, and he accepts you anyway. He knows we struggle to live in the truth, that we sin and mess up and look out for ourselves, but he loves you so much, and he wants you to know him so fully, that

Jesus came into the world to bridge that canyon between us and God, paying the penalty of death for your rebellion, my rebellion, that we might live in him.

This is the remarkable, unquenchable love of God.

Verse 7 says: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.” Here John returns to one of his major themes of this book, which is love, and in particular, God’s love and our love.

Where acknowledging that Jesus is the Christ is a mark that the truth is in us, loving one another is a mark of living out that truth, and evidence that we have life in God because love comes from God. He continues “Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”

As my commentary said, if we’re born of God, brought into his family, then we must also love. It’s the family likeness. The trait of all believers is love, and since love comes from God, it shows we know God. If we don’t love, we don’t know God. You can claim all sorts of theological knowledge, have memorised scripture, live out the ten commandments (at least in theory), serve on a church roster, but if you don’t love, then you don’t know God. Why? Because John says that God *is* love.

This is one of those simple little phrases that packs an almighty truth punch. Maybe if 1 John is a croissant then actually it's a chocolate croissant and you take a bite in and you find in the middle of this dense, sweet, amazing little chocolatey bit amongst the other amazingness. This phrase strikes at the heart of the nature of God. Love isn’t just an attribute of God, like his justice or his faithfulness, but rather it’s the very *essence* of how he relates himself. God shows his justice in love, he proves his faithfulness in love, he rules in love. Love is a completely different tier of God’s character, and everything he does is done in love.

If someone does not love, then they don’t have any knowledge of God. Again as Con Campbell says in my commentary: “To know God is to know love, and to know love is to show love. Without showing love, there is no knowing love and there is no knowing God.”

And the interesting thing about love in the church is we don't generate that from ourselves. In fact, if we were left up to our own devices, we would just be self-serving. We would be a mirror image of the world that we see out there. But God brings love into his church by the gospel.

Verse 9 “This is how God shows his love amongst us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” That's how much God loves you.

And so then John goes on to say God's love is in us, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. He's not saying that God somehow kind of needed us to be able to love fully, but rather what it's saying is that God's love for us overflows so abundantly that as we know God's love and we overflow his love to one another, we just see this beautiful image of love in the church.

And so John says that this is how we can be confident that we are in God and God is in us.

1. We have his love,
2. he has given us his spirit,
3. and we affirm the truth: We testified that the father sent his son to be the saviour of the world.

These are the marks of a Christian. Someone who affirms the truth about Jesus and who out of the love of Jesus loves others. Jesus says that the world will know who his disciples are because we love one another. And it's true. I look out at our church, at the diversity that we have here, at the difference in ages and interests and capabilities, and I see love. You love one another in ways that defies our culture. It's beautiful. And I love being with you here on a Sunday because here I know that I'm accepted. Yes, I wear this collar and you might kind of see me as a little bit different, but no, I'm just like one of you. I'm just a sinner like you, and I just struggle like you, and you accept me for who I am because Jesus has accepted you and you love me. Isn't that remarkable? It's beautiful.

Well John concludes with a warning. He says to beware hate in verse 20: "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. Whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister."

For John this is a way of showing that these false teachers who have come and derided him and his teaching can't be from God because they don't have fellowship of love.

This is so important to God: that we would have unity. Why? Well, love is made complete so that we'll have confidence on the day of judgement. Verse 18: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." But perfect love gives us confidence on the day of judgment when God calls us to account for all that we have done. We can stand firm, confident to say, I've loved Christ and I've loved his church.

So, let me encourage you today, as we have thought from 1 John 4 about what it means to live the life of a Christian: Remain in the Word, know it. Listen to the Spirit, let him guide you, let him shape your life. Love one another because God's love is abundantly available to us and so we should love.