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1st John 4:1–3, NLT.

Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world. ² This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. ³ But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here.

Being Fully Christian.

I often talk about aspects of the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, that are not historically accurate, have been mistranslated, have been misinterpreted over the millennia, or have been taken so out of context that the lessons traditionally drawn from them have nothing to do with the author's original intent. It might give one the impression that I'm not a "true" believer, that I don't think orthodox Christianity is valid. But that's not true, and in fact, there is one traditional belief that people like to doubt today, but I believe is the very core of our faith and that it is critical that we cling to it.

We've talked about Gnosticism before. In the centuries after Jesus left the Earth, Gnostic teachers competed with orthodox Christian teachers to grab the

hearts of followers of Christ. Gnostic beliefs varied greatly, with many widely divergent sects. A common theological thread was that the world around us and humanity are inherently corrupt. Gnostic believers spent their lives seeking something called “*gnosis*”, which is Greek for “knowledge” or “awareness”. This was a form of mystical knowledge that was needed for salvation – and only a few had the ability to obtain “*gnosis*” in their lifetimes. Another key Gnostic belief was that the physical world was created by an evil entity, which is why it is corrupt, and that therefore Jesus couldn’t be God – as God was highly inferior. But they did believe that Jesus taught this special knowledge that led to eternal salvation to a few, and that is why studying his ways and teachings is key to salvation. Critically, Jesus was a divine messenger, a special, cosmic being – not a human and not God, either.

I met someone recently who identified as being Gnostic. His beliefs don’t matter here. I’ll say just two things. He was quite young and there is a renewed interest in things that are “Pagan”, and sometimes these people are called “Neopagans”. Gnostics were not strictly pagans, but they were heavily influenced by Greco-Roman paganism, and in some ways, Gnosticism was a blend of Christianity and paganism. This young man was quite sick. They were performing tests on him to see if they could figure out what was wrong. He had a Bible by his

bed, and he volunteered that he had a great appreciation for the teachings of Jesus. But he seemed lost and heartless and scared. He said that he was a Gnostic and that he did not believe that Jesus was God. I learned something else about his faith. I will get back to that. We'll call him Noah.

1st John is an intriguing letter. On one hand, it is elegant and very compelling. It uses simple language, in the Greek, with a vocabulary of only 303 Greek words. The letter is widely seen as being direct and simple, yet subtle and mystical. Although it is constructed as a letter, it is really a sermon that lays out the basic principles of being a Christian, while at the same time warning readers about lies and mistruths that some people will preach to them. But while it is a beautiful piece of writing, it is, on the other hand, not laid out in a traditional, organized fashion. It is not a well-honed essay. This is because the author does not list concepts in a logical, orderly fashion. Instead, the author weaves together a handful of important ideas and returns to them over and over. It is repetitious. The author had a clear motivation in writing the letter, and it is a problem that Paul the Great Evangelist to the Gentiles often confronted in the letters he wrote to various churches and individuals: there were people associated with the church who did not follow the basic teachings of Jesus Christ, and were attempting to mold their own, twisted version of the emerging Christian faith. The author of

John uses a very strong word to refer to these teachers: *antichrists*. While he does not focus on precisely what these people are preaching, we believe that he was combatting an early form of Gnosticism. The author wanted his readers to understand the importance of proper, orthodox Christian faith.

But just who is this author, John? Traditionally, the Gospel of John, and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John are all attributed to the Apostle John. What's true is that content-wise, the three letters are very closely related to the Gospel of John. Either the same person wrote them all or the author of the letters studied that Gospel diligently. To complicate things, though, it's not clear that the three letters were written by the same person, and if the Apostle John wrote any of the three letters, he would have had to have been very elderly when he wrote them. To make things even more complicated, there is great debate over the authorship of the Gospel of John: it might well not be the Apostle. In the end, all that matters for us today is that 1st John does a magnificent job of laying out the basics of true, orthodox Christianity, and it was written very early in the evolution of the Christian faith. It is a key document for any believer to read. One last issue before I get down to the focus of this message: who were the recipients of 1st John? It is believed that it was written in Ephesus and sent to churches in Asia Minor, now modern Turkey. This is because John the Apostle is believed to have

founded these churches - and the school of thought that arose around John the Apostle was based in Ephesus. The letters were probably written around the year 100, and together with the Gospel, they form an elegant whole.

What does 1st John teach us? Because of the repetitive nature of the letter, we can find many of the basic teachings of the letter covered closely together in various places in the letter. Here are the first three verses of Chapter 4:

Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world. ² This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. ³ But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here.

This is a warning that we hear multiple times in the letter, and we read it in various letters of Paul. One thing is very intriguing: in many ways, we need a similar warning today. John says that that we must be careful about people who claim to be teaching the basics of our faith. It's clear here that John is worried about people who are teaching that Jesus was never fully human, that he was a spiritual being parading around as a person, but that he was not a human.

Consider the next three verses of Chapter 4:

⁴ But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who

lives in the world. ⁵ Those people belong to this world, so they speak from the world's viewpoint, and the world listens to them. ⁶ But we belong to God, and those who know God listen to us. If they do not belong to God, they do not listen to us. That is how we know if someone has the Spirit of truth or the spirit of deception.

This is a warning that again is quite relevant today: our faith is in many ways not consistent with the values of the world around us. We must be careful about people who want to somehow compromise, to make the teachings of Christianity mesh with worldly values. What probably caused John to write these lines is that like today, there were people who taught that it's not necessary to believe that Jesus is God. Today, we must worry about this in a big way: it's popular to teach that Jesus was just a truly holy man – yes, a human, but only a man who was a bit nuts and thought he was God. However, they believe, Jesus taught us to have fantastic ethical values. There are many people who profess to be Christians, while at the same time saying that we should focus on what Jesus taught, not on the myth that he was a man-God. But orthodox faith, the true teachings of Christianity are clear: Jesus was both a man and God at the same time. We need Jesus to be both a complete human and completely God. Noah taught me this.

Here are the next two verses, 7 and 8, of Chapter 4 of 1st John:

⁷ Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. ⁸ But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

This is a theme that John focuses on heavily in this letter. You cannot claim to be a believer, to be a follower of Christ, if you do not show the same sort of unconditional love that Jesus showed for all people. John teaches that love is the greatest gift that God gives us. He tells us that we cannot learn to love on our own, that love isn't something that begins with us. Love starts with God and comes to us. Only then can we offer love to others. This is another lesson that is important for us today: our faith teaches us that we cannot build a moral, ethical society where everyone is treated fairly, with love, unless we do it through God. We cannot do it on our own. When we act on our own, when we try to separate ourselves from God and build a culture that is entirely humanist, we fail. We need God to guide us through life, and the very first step is to accept God's love. Armed with this, we can go out into the world and offer our love to others.

Let's step back and look at the first two verses of Chapter 2 of 1st John:

My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. ² He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.

This is another major theme of John's, and it is something that many educated, sophisticated, influential people in our society today deny: that sin is a real thing. John tells us that there is something worse than simply offending other people or

disobeying a rule created by human beings. We can truly, deeply offend God by going against the laws of God. John says that we need help when it comes to sin. We need to avoid it, but as people, it is infinitely hard to live a truly sinless life. When we do sin, though, there is someone we can turn to: Jesus Christ, that person who is God and who did indeed come to Earth as a human. Jesus will, in effect, be our lawyer before God. Jesus will accept our admission of guilt and Jesus will cleanse us of our sins. Here is the reason, John tells us, that Jesus can do this: Jesus sacrificed his human life, Jesus became a man and truly suffered as a human on a cross, so that we could be forgiven of our sins. If we do not believe this, we can never free ourselves of sin. John wants the readers of his letter to see a strong parallel between the animal and plant sacrifices of Jews in the Temple and the sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus sacrificed himself to free us from the need to somehow make things right with God. We must believe, as followers of Christ, that Jesus, in a literal fashion, frees us from our sins.

There is more to this point of John's, that Jesus offered himself up in sacrifice for us. Here are verses 5 through 10 of the first Chapter of 1st John:

This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. ⁶ So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. ⁷ But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we

*claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth.
9 But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and
to cleanse us from all wickedness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling
God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.*

This is another critical theme of 1st John: that God is light, that if we want to walk in the light, if we want to live the way God wants us to live, we must honor God's requirement that we reflect the love that God gives us. John uses the metaphor of light, which is used in many places in Scripture, to represent the great, eternal truths given to us by God. He says that by following the teachings of Christ, we can remain completely in the light. We will never be in darkness. But we cannot be hypocrites; we cannot say that we are living in the light but secretly live in spiritual darkness. There is no compromise to being a true follower of Christ. Jesus is the one who can forgive our sins and cleanse us, and again, John tells us this is because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. We must admit to God that we do sin. There is a subtlety in this passage. John says that if we live in the light, then we will have fellowship with each other, while at the same time having fellowship with Jesus. Sharing our faith with each other, helping each other maintain and build our faith – that is a core aspect of being a believer. We cannot do it alone. We need God. We need each other. This is why the early Christians used home churches – to quickly bootstrap a true fellowship among followers of Christ.

There is one last thing about 1st John: it has to do with something else that modern people, especially highly educated ones, like to dismiss: the notion that we can have eternal life. Here are verses 11 to 13 of Chapter 5 of 1st John:

¹¹ And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life. ¹³ I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life.

Before I finish, let me say that I have used the New Living Translation in this message because 1st John is so theological. The NLT is simply easier to read when it comes to conceptual material.

So, getting back to Noah. The problem with his faith is that he had intellectualized it. He saw the Bible as a text about an infinitely good man who mistakenly believed that he was God – or that people who came after him claimed that he was God. As a result, Noah didn't pray. He didn't believe that someone could be fully human and fully God. As I talked to him, I realized that he was like many people today: judgmental, breaking humanity into two non-intersecting groups: good people and evil people. As a result, he couldn't believe that there could be a God who could love all of humanity. And he therefore could not love all those made in the image of God. He also put himself in the "good" category, seeing himself as doing nothing that was truly wrong, as never offending God. He didn't believe that there could be a true afterlife, spent with

God. Everything was rooted here on Earth right now. His world was black and white, self-centered, and Godless. It left him cold and alone and unable to seek refuge in his suffering. His faith could not lift him up because his faith was so deeply rooted in the world around him – a great concern of the author of 1st John. This is why we must be fully Christian, just as Jesus was fully human and fully God.