

LIVING RIGHT IN A WRONG WORLD

STUDY THIRTEEN

Distinguishing Truth from Error

1 John 4:1–6

The passage we're looking at tells it like it is. John has no interest in winning friends and influencing people. He has no concern for making you feel good. Thank God! Because John is concerned about communicating the truth. If the truth helps you feel great, wonderful. But if it doesn't and then you decide to listen to only what you want to hear with no spiritual discernment, then, trust me, you're moving in the wrong direction.

—Charles R. Swindoll

EARLER in his letter, John spotlighted the lie-touting false teachers who had slithered into the church. He wrote “I am writing these things to warn you about those who want to lead you astray” (1 John 2:26) and he encouraged his readers by affirming “we are already God’s children” (3:2). John also focused his readers on Jesus’ command to love (3:11).

False teachers had questioned the spiritual authority of John’s apostolic testimony, the physical nature of Jesus Christ, the superiority of love, and the need to refrain from sin. These deceivers didn’t question just one or two pillars of God’s truth . . . *they challenged many!*

So John balanced the command to love with the practice of spiritual discernment. We can’t blindly open our arms to *everything*. Those who love truth cannot also embrace falsehood. For that reason, we must be discerning. John would urge us in our day with the same directives he gave in his day: uphold both love and discernment.

In this *Searching the Scripture* Bible study of 1 John 4:1–6, we explore John’s direction for how to distinguish between truth and error. We also uncover the cause for the proliferation of false teaching that has always assaulted the flourishing of God’s people.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Distinguishing Truth from Error

1 John 4:1–6



PREPARE YOUR HEART

On the eve of His betrayal, Jesus uttered what may be the most important prayer for His followers. Theologians call it Jesus' high priestly prayer because He interceded for all Christians who would face difficulties and hostilities after His death. Jesus prayed:

I have given them your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. (John 17:14–17)

Take a few minutes to reflect on Jesus' prayer. Consider the wonderful reality that He had you in mind when He prayed. Think over how that prayer has proved true in your life. After your time of reflection, pray for the Spirit's presence and guidance in your study.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

John opened the passage of our study with two urgent commands regarding the topic of spiritual discernment. Read *1 John 4:1* and summarize those commands.



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Think of it this way. Everyone who is teaching is a mouthpiece for either truth or error. Every individual represents the spirit of truth or the spirit of error. When you speak for the spirit of truth, you are representing the living God. When you speak error, you are representing the adversary himself. Everyone who teaches is either representing truth or error, so “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits.” —Chuck Swindoll



Observation: The Why and How of Our Obedience

Begin observation by reflectively reading through our entire passage, *1 John 4:1–6*.¹ Jot down any thoughts you wish to preserve below.

The “Why” behind John’s Commands

Did you catch the logical connective in *1 John 4:1* after he stated his commands? Reread the verse and note John’s reason for such commands.



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The “How” for Practicing John’s Commands

Next, John provides the method for testing the spirits. Look at *1 John 4:2–3*. What test did John give for distinguishing between true and false spirits?

False teachers in John’s day so misrepresented Jesus that their portrayal of Him contrasted radically with the Jesus John had seen, heard, known, and loved. Whether its downplaying the importance of Jesus or recasting the image of Jesus or garbling the teaching of Jesus, all false teachers distort key truths connected with Christ, our Savior and Lord.



Interpretation: True and False Followers

John argued that we can discern the spirit of the teaching we follow by the practical life-outcomes that teaching produces. Such life-outcomes are revealed by our words and deeds—what we say about Jesus and how we follow His teaching. Therein lies the test.



Chuck’s Commentary Insight

First John Theme: Testing

These two tests—faithfulness in word and deed to the person of Jesus Christ and faithfulness and obedience to God’s word—are sure, reliable guides for discerning between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.²



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Notice how John spoke of two categories of followers of Jesus in 1 John 4:4–6. Some follow Jesus in truth. Others profess a false Christ and, therefore, follow Jesus in falsehood. Use the chart below to list the characteristics of each group.

Followers from God 1 John 4:4, 6	Followers from the World 1 John 4:5–6

First John 4:4 states that Christians have overcome those who aren't from God and that "greater is He who is in you [Christians] than he who is in the world" (NASB). Why are these two claims important for Christians today? Consult your personal Bible study library or Netbible.org for resources to help you interpret these statements.

Jesus-followers possess the indwelling Holy Spirit of God who provides divine power that exceeds all other spiritual forces. He gives us the strength to withstand spiritual attacks, the discernment to spot deceptive words, and the posture of heart to love others as Jesus loves us.



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Here is the principle that is essential to remember: When you are searching for truth, listen carefully to the one who is teaching and look closely at those who are following. Listen to what is said and what is not said. Listen to what is conveniently left out. Listen to the wording, listen to the subtle phrases, listen to the implications. Listen. And then look at those who are following. Do they have their Bibles? Are they serious about their faith? Are they sharing Christ? Are they in the battle? You'll be able to tell whether they are from God or from the world. —Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Watch Out for False Prophets

Warnings of false teaching reverberated from every spiritual pillar in the early church. Jesus Himself began the tradition. Then warnings came from Paul, Peter, Jude, and John. Let's look at a few of these statements. Summarize the gist of each of the following passages and note how it correlates with the main passage of our study.

John 16:1–4, 13–15

1 Timothy 4:1–5



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1 John 4:1–6

2 Peter 2:1–3

Jude 3–4

Nearly every book in the New Testament contains at least some emphasis on abiding in the truth or avoiding spiritual deception. Some books were written for that very reason! In short, Christians, no matter their age or location or maturity, should guard against false teaching.



Application: Six Reminders for Believers Today

After prayerful study and reflection on 1 John 4:1–6, Chuck Swindoll developed six key truths all Christians in our day should remember. Here they are:

- 1) *We live in treacherous times.* We can't expect our spiritual growth to occur in an easy, convenient, or smooth environment.
- 2) *Discernment plays a vital role in our spiritual health.* We can't kick our brains into autopilot or merely float along in the culture's stream. We must keep our eyes open, chest out, and head up. Be vigilant.
- 3) *We must continue embracing our historical roots and doctrinal truth.* No swerving. No reimaging. No fancy new doctrines. We must uphold the doctrines and practices of traditional Christianity. Only this truth can make a legitimate difference in the world.



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- 4) *Each generation of believers has a serious responsibility.* God has no grandchildren. All Christians must persevere in spiritual growth and evangelism. All Christians must persevere in faith, hope, and love.
- 5) *It is the job of church leaders to guide and guard the ministry of their church.* Church leaders point the way and flag the dangers. Church leaders receive a ministry by the mercy of God as a stewardship from God.
- 6) *A strong and healthy church today is no guarantee of a strong and healthy church tomorrow.* Churches must take nothing for granted. They must abide in faithful practices—grand or minute, seen or unseen—to ensure today’s strength continues.

Think over those statements. Reflect on them. What impression do they give you? What feelings do they create in you? In what ways do they inspire you to cling to Christ and guard against falsities?

Now, reflect on the truth you learned in this study. How should you apply this truth to your life?



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Lastly, in what ways can you take what you've learned and share it with your Christian brothers and sisters in your circle? Do any take their spiritual health for granted? Do any appear tempted to believe a false teacher? If so, pray for wisdom for a way to lovingly approach that person and to share the truth you learned in this study. If a plan readily comes to mind, write it below.

By now, we can heartily agree that God's church must stand against any distortion of spiritual truth or any tasteless reimagining of authentic, biblical worship. Anything that strays might give immediate gratification but will eventually leave us empty—like chewing gum. Instead, we must stand with Christ and, by His grace, enjoy the nourishing, spiritual meat of God's Word.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, Your Word contains truth I find nowhere else. How satisfying it truly is! Thank You for leading me to that well of nourishment. Thank You for leading me to that rock foundation to stand upon. Thank You for leading me to Your Son, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I pray in awe and gratitude for who You are and what You do. In Jesus' name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To review Chuck's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study method, visit the website sts.insight.org. If you do not have Chuck's *Living Insights* commentary on 1 John in your library, [grab a copy](#) at the Insight for Living Ministries web store.
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, vol. 14 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2018), 107.

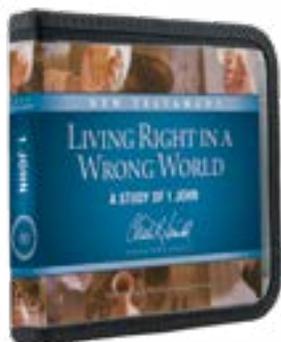


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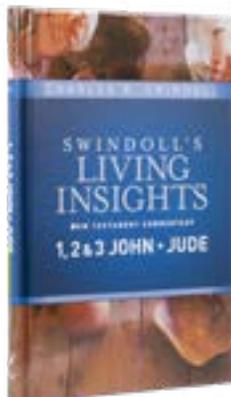
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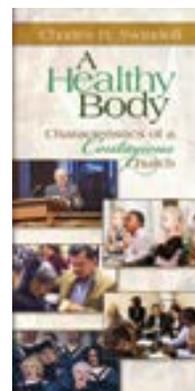
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For the 2020 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Aaron Massey in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of Pastoral Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.

