

THE FELLOWSHIP

An Exposition of First John

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CHRISTIAN LITERATURE CRUSADE Fort Washington, Pennsylvania

CHAPTER NINE - THE PROOFS OF THE FELLOWSHIP

I John 3:19-4:6

19 **And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.**
20 **For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.**
21 **Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.**
22 **And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.**
23 **And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.**
24 **And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.**

1 **Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.**
2 **Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God:**
3 **And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.**
4 **Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.**
5 **They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them.**
6 **We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.**

IN 4:I we have the word "**try**". It is a technical word, used of the testing, or assaying, of metals to see if they ring true, or are up to standard. Our passage provides us with certain formulae whereby we may test the realities of things, certain proofs whereby the members of the Fellowship may discern and differentiate between the genuine and the false. Note that phrase, "**Hereby we know**" - it comes here four times; and on each occasion it introduces what is the acid test of truth.

THE TEST OF THE TRUE SOUL

"**Hereby we know that we are of the truth**" (19) - that we are truly His. Let us not start testing others; we don't know their hearts, only GOD does. But let us be thorough and fearless in testing ourselves. How then are we to know this? The phrase apparently connects up with what has just been said in the previous verses, and refers to the possession and practice of a loving Christian spirit.

"**If our heart condemn us**" - if we are conscious of some partial, or momentary failure in the Christian temper, what then? Does that mean that we no longer love Him, and have forfeited our right to His Name? The fault must, of course, be confessed, and repented of, and thus be forgiven; and then we may leave the matter with GOD.

Who is "**greater than our heart, and knoweth all things**" - Who, because He understands, undertakes. Do you recall that poignant utterance of Peter, in that after-breakfast interview with his Risen Lord. Whom he had so basely denied - three times then he quailed, three times now is he questioned as to the real nature of his love.

At last he breaks out with the heart-broken words. "**Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee**", (John 21:17). Yes, in spite of it all, the MASTER knew - and still knows, though we fall, if our love is true: the not falling is the test whereby we may know.

"**If our heart condemn us not**" - it is evident that the word "**heart**" is meant to be taken almost as the equivalent of conscience; and it is presumed that that conscience is in a good condition.

Let us beware of supposing that conscience is the voice of GOD, as some people assume. It is certainly His gift to man, like all other elements of his make-up but, like the fingers that can steal, or the feet that can stray, this function also can go sadly awry. Under the stress of conscience many evils and cruelties have been perpetrated, as in times of religious persecution, as in the case of Saul of Tarsus - "**I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the Name of Jesus**" (Acts 26:9).

It is good to find this same man, now in his regenerate days, declaring, "**herein I do exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men**", (Acts 24:16).

Our conscience, then, can be seared, by doing despite to it; it can be silenced, like your alarm clock, if you persistently disregard its morning summons; it can act ignorantly, if it be not educated by the teaching of the Word of GOD - "**ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures**", (Matthew 22:29), says the MASTER to His foes.

John Milton has a vivid metaphor for conscience in his *Paradise Lost*, he calls it "the umpire of the soul." All we cricketers know how mistaken an umpire can be, through ignorance of the Laws of the Game, for instance. Let us, then, be careful to train our conscience by continually exercising ourselves in Bible truth. A sensitive conscience is one of the best blessings that a man can have - and the members of the Fellowship in our verse 21 are presumed to possess that quality, and finding themselves held innocent by that exact inquisitor, they are "**[assured]**" (19) of the "true" verdict of the Great Judge.

THE TEST OF THE TRUE INTERCESSOR

Nothing of all the activity of the members of the Fellowship is of greater importance than this ministry of intercession; and because, for the due exercise of it, we must depend so largely upon GOD, we read "**Hereby we know that He abideth in us**" (24). Here is the guarantee to us of the truth of that sublime benefit: "**The Spirit which He hath given us**" the Divine Donation vouchsafed to every Christian, for "**if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His**", (Romans 8:9). And the special relation of the Divine Third Person to our life of true intercession is seen in this same chapter of the Roman Epistle (8:26), "**Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us**". Think, then, of some of the striking things that He has here caused John to write for the guidance and encouragement of GOD's true intercessors.

The Statement - "**whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him**" (22). That is a sweeping assertion; but, nevertheless, let us be quite confident that the "**[receiving]**" is all right if the "**[asking]**" is all right. The "**whatsoever**" is here stated; the "*howsoever*" is implied - a right asking is concerned, not only with the matter, but also with the manner. Let us mark at this point that there is a stage of spiritual development in the experience of the true, Spirit-guided intercessor in which he may be sure that his prayers shall be answered.

The Condition - "**because we keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight**". It is a truism that GOD always keeps His promises: we may put our finger - indeed our whole being - on it, and rest upon His fidelity to His pledged word. But, wait! Before you are in a position to do that, you must remember that almost, if not quite, without exception, the promises of GOD are not unconditional, and their fulfillment is dependent upon such conditions. Promise and proviso go in pairs - if we keep the second, He will keep the first. There are several conditions attaching to GOD's gracious undertaking to answer our petitions. What is, perhaps, the chiefest of them is the one that is enunciated here - the all-important "**because**"! It all depends upon our attitude towards Him: an obedient conduct, and a pleasing behaviour. A prayer that is acceptable and answered is dependent, not on diligence, nor on eloquence; but, quite simply, on obedience.

The Explanation - is to be noted of, what John implies in his use of that word "**commandments**". Lest we should suppose that if we do not keep the Ten Commandments, our prayers will be neither heard nor heeded, he hastens to explain what he means. "**This is His commandment**" (23) - notice that, though he is citing two, he conceives them as one, as if they hung together. "**Believe**" Him; "**love**" others - the first the source of the second; the second the sign of the first.

Here is the twofold secret of His manifold answers.

The Atmosphere - in which effectual prayer flourishes is now stated, "**dwelleth in Him, and He in him**" (24). How true it is that we never really know people until we live with them. Residing there, we get to know their mind about things, and instinctively realize what we might ask for.

Suppose you were "fond of a glass", and discovered that the people you had gone to live with were staunch teetotalers - you would know, wouldn't you, what you must not ask for? I hope this is not a ribald illustration of the point we are at in our present study. GOD has allowed our

deeply privileged intimacy with Him to be described under the figure of two "dwelling" together - "*he in Him, and He in him*".

It is in this wondrous nearness that "**we have the mind of Christ**", (I Corinthians 2:16), and become aware, as if by instinct, of the things He would have us ask for, and so: "**whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him**".

Reader and writer: shall we pray for one another that we may attain to such a fruitful understanding of the Divine mind?

THE TEST OF THE TRUE SPIRIT

There are many spirits abroad in the world to-day angling for our adherence and allegiance; and there is a type of Christian, ill-instructed in the Scriptures (which, incidentally, the wrong spirits misquote ad lib.), who are only too readily gullible to every front-door exponent of false teaching - only too liable to "**believe... every spirit**" (4:1).

Apparently, it was very much the same in John's day; and, under Divine guidance, he offers the members of the Fellowship (now, as well as then) an acid test whereby the real nature, whether true or false, can be determined. "**Hereby know ye the Spirit of God**" (2). Try this next time they come to your doorstep! What, then, is the Test? "**Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that confesseth not . . . is not of God, and this is that spirit of antichrist**" (2-3).

For many years this passage troubled me, because I could not see why such tremendous issues should hang upon so simple a thing as the acknowledgment that JESUS CHRIST was an historical personage. Of course He was: even these false spirits will agree to that. Secular historians, quite independently of the Bible - Josephus, Pliny, for instance - record the fact. Before giving you my conviction, let me remind you that "**JESUS**" is the Name of the Master's Humanity, and that "**CHRIST**" is the title of His Deity, the Divine anointed One come to be the promised and predicted Messiah, Saviour, and KING. Do you see now what I am driving at? Yes; this is the suggested meaning behind the verse, "Every spirit that confesseth that JESUS is CHRIST come in the flesh..." An acknowledgment, you see, of His Deity.

Chapter 5:1 of the Epistle supports my interpretation, doesn't it? And the first and fundamental test of every spirit claiming to be of GOD is, "**What think ye of Christ?**" (Matthew 22:42). If you are satisfied that they believe that He was more than a wonderful, remarkable Man, more than a unique Man, the Best ever, that, indeed, they confess to a belief in His true, real, complete Deity - then you can proceed to a further examination. If they do not hold this belief, this passage justifies you - even instructs you - to close the interview. Waste no further time!

What, then, is the believer's attitude? One of hostility, and of victory. Not through their own cleverness is this to be; but by a threefold secret (4).

(1) *A relationship* - "**ye are of God**." You are His, and, therefore, on His side. Even if, in your own circumstances, you stand alone, the only real Christian, facing opposition, engendered by these ungodly spirits, you may remember that even "one with GOD is a majority".

(2) *A result* - "**ye... have overcome them**". Of course, because His is the winning side; and if you keep faith with Him, He will keep faith with you. What joy! What thrill - to be on the Victory Side. The sign whereof is not a "V", but an empty Cross!

(3) *A reason* - the Divine indwelling. "**Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world**". Because the Victor abides in us, we can be victors over all the powers of darkness, and his emissaries "**in the world**".

THE TEST OF THE TRUE TEACHER

Here the apostle passes over from the spirits of anti-christ to the persons in whom they are manifested; or, if you like, from the teaching to the teacher. "**Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error**" (6).

The two orders of teachers may be recognized each for what they are in themselves, and by the spirit with which they are imbued. Examine these teachers, then.

The Test is not Popularity. The false teachers may attract to themselves great congregations, they may enjoy a good press, they may get satisfying preferment, and may be reckoned as highly successful - so runs the record, "**the world heareth them**". Of course, popularity is not necessarily a sign of falsity. Many a true teacher has been a popular preacher; and some of the biggest congregations to-day are ministered by faithful pastors. We are only saying that a big following is not, either way, the proof of a sound teacher.

The worldly preacher (5) is "**of the world**" - his standards are those of the world; his viewpoint is surprisingly worldly; his power is largely vested in worldly attributes; his appeal is pretty much to the world. "**Therefore**", they are popular there. The members of the Fellowship will not be misled; they will be on their guard against measuring true success by so erroneous a test.

The Test is, after all, Spirituality. These teachers are not worldlings, but godly. GOD is their aim, their message, their power, their joy. The world turns from them with scorn, if not with amusement, and rates them Bible-punchers. Bible preachers they certainly are, who rest on the Scriptures, not "**wrest**" them, II Peter 3:16, as the false teachers do; for, as Shakespeare knowingly reminds us, "the devil can quote Scriptures to his purpose" - though he generally gets it wrong, as in Matthew 4:6 compared with Psalm 91:11. "**He that knoweth God heareth us**" (6), claims the apostle - the congregation recognizes the accent, and at once perceives the truth.

This is beyond us, says the worldly, what is the man driving at? This is of GOD, says the heavenly citizen, we would know that speech anywhere. If you, my reader, are a preacher, or teacher, would this not be a proper yearning of your heart:

"O that it might be said of me, Surely thy speech bewrayeth thee,
Thou hast been with JESUS of Galilee, With JESUS of Galilee."

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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