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Welcome to the New Life Podcast, a ministry of New Life Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, New York. Today we have this week's preached by Tim LaCroix, our senior pastor. Join us for worship each week at 10 o'clock at 950 Danby Road, Ithaca, New York. You can also visit us on our website, www.newlifethica.org. Now here's this week's sermon.

00:43

A reading from the first epistle of the apostle John, chapter 4, verses 1 through 14.

01:13

and now is in the world already. 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. 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.

01:41

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God. And whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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 perpetuation for our sins.

02:09

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us because he has given us of his spirit. And we have seen and testify that the father has sent his son to be the savior of the world. This is the word of the Lord.

02:38

It's hard to know what's real these days. There are a lot of things purporting to be true which are not true, things that are called misinformation or deep fakes. There was an instance during the election where

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There was a robocall that purported to be President Biden in the state of New Hampshire telling people not to go vote in the primary. Of course, it turned out to be a fake. It turned out to be generative AI. So with generative AI, we can be fooled. We can be fooled by pictures that look like they're true. It can be fooled by videos that look like they're true, images that look like they're true. There's a funny example of disinformation that I want to tell you about.

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Back in 2023, there was a story that Walt Disney World was going to lower its drinking age to 18. This article broke this story and the article had sources and it had people giving quotes, people both from the local government and also from Walt Disney World. And the story got legs and even the local news reported on it that Walt Disney World was seeking to change their drinking age to 18.

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The problem is it was completely fake. It was not true. In fact, if you did a little bit of searching around the website, you would see on the masthead and on the about section that that website was a parody site. It didn't even claim to be real. It actually tried to let you know that it was a parody. It wasn't true. It wasn't real. But yet, it looked real. It looked real. And so people believed that Walt Disney wanted to change the drinking age.

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There's some of these examples that are a little more nefarious. They're a little more nefarious and a little bit more hard to spot. It is widely believed that someone, and widely believed to be Russian agents, have created a bunch of fake news sites, fake local news sites across the country. They come in and they find legitimate sounding names, like for example, the Ithaca Post.

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What's the Ithaca Post have to say? This is interesting. What's the Ithaca Post have got to say about this or that issue? There's only one problem. If you're from Ithaca, you've been here a while, you know there is no such thing as the Ithaca Post. There's the Ithaca Journal, there's the Ithaca Voice, there's the Tompkins Weekly, there's the 14850 News, but there is no such thing as the Ithaca Post. So they create these fake news sites and then they populate them mostly with true stories. So it looks legit. It's got pictures of reporters and so forth. They get the images from fake

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Facebook profiles and LinkedIn profiles and so forth. But then they salt these sites with fake stuff. And if one or two of the fake stories catches legs, then they've got an interesting piece of disinformation or perhaps useful. One particular one of these was a story from one of these news sites, fake news sites, that said that Vladimir Zelensky's wife had gone on a shopping spree in New York City and bought a bunch of stuff and purchased a yacht even.

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And this was all with United States defense dollars. I have no idea why Russians would want anybody to believe that was true.

06:04

they did. So how are we to know what's true and what's not? How are we to know what's real? It's a real issue today. In fact, it's not only on the news and in politics. It really extends to the products we buy or perhaps the medical treatments that we may pursue. How do we know what's true? Like a product, how do we know it's a good product? How do we know it's a real product from a reputable company? How do we know that the people making reviews for this product that are giving it five-star reviews aren't bots? You know, how do we know that?

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It's very hard to know. But there are actually more important things than news or products in the realm of knowing what's true or not. And I think for us, and I would argue for anybody, there's a lot of uncertainty and there's a lot of disinformation about what's true with regard to religion and faith and morality. If you go on Wikipedia, or yeah, let's just say Wikipedia.

07:03

I've been preparing this series, New Life series, the story of the Bible, and if you go onto Wikipedia to kind of see, sometimes it can give you a helpful outline, sometimes it can give you good information, but inevitably, if you look up a book of the Bible, or let's say the story of Jesus, which I was doing this week, if you stay after church, it will inevitably talk about the majority of scholars today.

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don't think any of this is real. They don't think the person who the Bible says wrote it, wrote it. They don't think that the events described in the Gospels really happened, etc. So how are we to know what's true? Some people say it isn't true. Some people say that it is true. How are we to know? Now the text today does not address how to spot disinformation, deep fakes, or whatever. But it does help us with the latter. It does present

08:00

answer it does present a claim of how to know if you're getting false information about God and about our faith and about morality and We see three tests basically three tests that John is giving three tests to run by to see if something is true and real Those three tests are printed in your bulletin again this week bonus

08:27

Content for you an outline printed in the bulletin for you three tests the theological test the ethical test and the trinitarian test this is sermon 9 on this series in first John and If you've been with us for any of them you have seen that John is very Circular circuitous he keeps coming back to the same things over and over in fact we saw today the theme of love love your brothers

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something we've talked about four or five times already the fact that Jesus Christ came in the flesh is something we mentioned before you know these themes keep circling around now if it's a sermon if this is if first John is a sermon given in one shot it's okay to have repetition it's okay to circle back around it can be very effective rhetorical technique but if you're taking this one sermon and you're turning it into 10, 12, 13 sermons it can become a little tedious so what

09:26

What we see is we're trying to pull out what's new and what is John coming back to? What is his point in coming back to this? And today we see something practical. We see that, he talks about love again. Yes, he talks about Christ being truly incarnate again. But here we have this very practical statement about there being false teachers in how to test what they say. How to test what they say. So how do we know?

09:56

The first thing we see is a theological test. We begin in verse 1, and this text is printed in your bulletin, you can look there or you can pull it up on however you access the Bible. It says in verse 1, Beloved, do not believe every spirit. Now the word spirit here doesn't mean ghost, it's a way of referring to people, like how you might say the ship had 300 souls on board. It means people. Test every person, test every teacher, test...

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every spirit. He says, not believe every spirit. Don't believe everything you see, in other words. Don't believe everything you hear. But John says you should test the spirits, you should test the people, you should test the messengers to see whether they are from God. Because many false prophets have gone out into the world. So we should test them. We shouldn't just receive any message that someone says about God or the Bible or morality, etc. We should test the message.

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How are we to test it? Well, John gives us three ways, as I said. The first way is a theological test. He says, verse 2, by this, very helpful, he's going to tell you how to test it, by this you know the Spirit of God, every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. Now this is the most explicit statement of the theology that he's been articulating and combating against in this letter.

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the fact that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. Jesus Christ is the title Messiah. So Jesus is Messiah and he came in the flesh. This is the particular claim, the particular theological claim that was being disputed by the false teachers. And so John says you can tell that a spirit comes from God if that person confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and if the person says that they are from God.

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This is John's theological test. It is very contextual to his environment in Ephesus in the late first century, as we have told you. There were false teachers that were saying that Jesus Christ did not come into the flesh. They were saying perhaps that he was not truly incarnate. Maybe he appeared as an apparition or maybe he was a vision, but not truly human, not fully human, that he did not come fully in the flesh.

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So John is combating this particular false teaching, but he's not saying that this is the only theological tenet to run the test through. That was the one that he was most concerned about because it was being taught there at that time. So we see in verse three that he begins, sorry, verse four, verses three and four, he expands it to a broader theological test.

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So verse 3, and every spirit that is not confessed that Jesus Christ is not from God. This is the spirit of Antichrist, which you heard was coming and is now in the world already. Verse 4, little children, you are from God and have overcome them. For he that is in you is greater than he that is in the world. We had a little song that had this verse when I was a kid. Greater is he that is in me.

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Some of the older heads are nodding. Greater is he that is in you than he who is in the world. Verse five, they are from the world, therefore they speak from the world and the world listens to them. Verse six, we are from God, whoever knows God listens to us. Whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know that the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. So it's a broader theological test than just the incarnation.

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John says, whoever is of God listens to us. Who is the us? The apostles. John is an apostle. When he says listens to us, he means the authority of the apostolic teaching, which is what the writings of which we call the New Testament. So the broader theological test is not just this particular issue that was being challenged in Ephesus that Jesus wasn't really human, but more broadly, that if anyone says,

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If anyone does not teach what we have taught, they are not from God. So the ultimate theological test is God's Word. the us here in verse 6, whoever listens to us, is the writings of the apostles. Of course, the writings of the apostles themselves tell us the story of Jesus. Jesus himself affirms the truth of the Old Testament writers. You can't have this one statement who listens to us without having the entirety of God's Word. And so,

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God's Word is the test. If it goes against God's Word, it's not to be trusted. If they're telling you something that we have not taught you, speaking of the apostles, then it is not from God. This is the test. It is a theological test. So how can we know what is truth and what is error? We have to know God's Word. You have to know God's Word. That's part of the reason why you have me.

15:14

As I studied God's Word in seminary, I spend my life studying God's Word and teaching it so I can share with you the knowledge and the wisdom I have gained. But that's not the end. You can't just depend on me because there are situations when I won't be there. And so John is encouraging us to know for ourselves and test for ourselves. And that means that we have to know God's Word in order to be able to test the spirits.

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So that is a theological test, the specific that Jesus Christ has come into the flesh, that he's really human, but the more general, anything that they have not taught is not from God, the apostles. So secondly, we move to the ethical test. And here we find that it is possible to be orthodox and not be from God. You know, we have the challenge of those who disbelieve the word, don't believe

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the word is true, don't believe that the things that the Bible teaches are true. But John wants to say even more, it has to be balanced that you can believe what is right, you can believe what is true, and yet not be of God. James makes this point very clearly in his letter, the letter of James, this is John's brother, so maybe they had similar ideas. James himself says that even the devil confesses that

16:40

God. Even the devil knows about God. Knowledge can be known by evil people. And so the challenge for those who are theologically orthodox is that we are also called to orthopraxy, which is right living, right practice. John puts it very simply. The ethical test is love. Do you love the brothers? Do you love God?

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And if someone has the most brilliant theology, the most accurate theology, the most correct beliefs, and they have not love, they aren't from God. What does Paul say? I can speak in tongues of men and angels in 1 Corinthians 13, he says. I can speak in tongues of men and angels, but if I have not love, it is like a clanging gong or a crashing cymbal. In other words, it's noise.

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And most of the people that are in our kind of section of the church, which considers itself to be more conservative, more Bible believing, we need to hear kind of this side of the section. We pride ourselves in our right belief. We pride ourselves in our knowledge. And we pursue it, and it should be pursued. I've just told you, in order to be able to test the Spirit, you have to know God's Word. But we also need to hear that if you have not love, you're not from God.

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There is a problem in the... I don't like the words right and left, but in this side of things that there are plenty of people who believe in the name of the truth, they cannot be loving. They don't have to be loving. They can actually be hateful in the name of the truth. And that is wrong. That is absolutely wrong. This is what John says, Beloved, let us love one another in verse 7. For love is from God. And whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

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Anyone who does not love, verse 8, does not know God. Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love. So here we see we are called to love, but we also see that love needs definition. So love can be very, you know, broad. You what is love? And a common phrase that we hear today, and I hope I don't offend anybody, but please stay with me, a common phrase that we hear today is love is love.

19:02

But John is essentially saying that love can't define love, God defines love. Let me give you an example. What if I said, what is art? Well, art is art. Art is art. Does art define art? In other words, what one person considers to be art, is it art? Now, of course, people debate over things, whether they are art or whether they aren't. Things purporting to be art have put forth very...

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Gross things that most people would say were gross and inappropriate, blasphemous, whatever. And people say, oh, it's art. So is art art? Does art define art, or does something else define art? This is actually what the ancient Greek philosophers were seeking to define Plato, Aristotle, and the rest. What is beauty? How do we define it? What is goodness? How do we define it? And that's all kind of bound up in what is art. I think the same thing is true of love. Does love define love? Do I define love?

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John is actually making a very provocative claim. Do not let the simplicity of his language hide the profundity of what he's saying. He is saying God defines love. Love is defined by God. That is a definition of love. God is love. He is loving, but he also defines it. So when John says let us love, that love is defined by who God is. God is love. And so he continues, in this the love of God was made manifest.

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The word manifest is a fancy word for it has been revealed, it's been shown to us. And how has the definition of love been shown to us? This, that God sent his only son into the world. In other words, love is giving, it's not receiving. Love is giving the most valuable thing, in fact, Jesus Christ, the Son of God,

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the most valuable thing in the universe, the most precious thing to God, He gives. He gives until it hurts. That's love. Love is self-sacrificial. It is selfless. It is not self-gratifying. The love test shows us that if something purports to be love, but it is actually pursuing self-gratification and selfishness, it is not love. It does not pass the ethical test.

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that defines love by God because God defines love in that he gave his son, he gave the most precious thing to him and that's what love is, it is giving not receiving, it is sacrificing not taking. So he says, in this is love. So, sorry going back to the second half of verse 9.

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Love is manifest that God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. So it's not only a gift for the sake of giving, it is a gift with a purpose in order to redeem us, in order to give us life, those who are dead to make them alive. In verse 10, 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. What does God's love do for us? Not only does God give

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His son, His most valuable possession, His most valuable relation to us, self-sacrificially giving until it hurts. That gift actually is the gift that makes us right with God. A propitiation is a gift that appeases the wrath of a deity. This gift is not only for the sake of being a gift, it is a gift for the sake of making us well, of curing the stain of this broken world that we live in.

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That is love. Not only to give us something, but to fix it something. To fix everything, in fact, is the claim that John is making. That is love. To give self-sacrificially, to give until it hurts, and the gift which makes us alive again. That is love. Beloved, he says in verse 11, if God so loved us, then we ought to love one another.

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In other words, that is the definition of love. The definition of love is that God gave his only son and that son became a propitiation, a satisfaction, if you will, that redeems us from our sins. That's love. And so we ought to love that way, self-sacrificially. We ought to give, be generous, giving until it hurts. We ought to give things that are life-giving to others. That is love.

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That is love and a love by any other name is not love, you see.

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And so he says in verse 12, no one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. So this we move to the third point, the Trinitarian test. We have the theological test, we have the ethical test, and now we move into not purely what we do and what we believe or know, but who we are and whose we are. Because you see the Christian faith is not simply doing things or believing things, it is

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Belonging it is being a child of God and here John makes the audacious claim that God is within us Greater is he that is in me? That claim is unique among the religions that God himself would live in us He says greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world. He closes this section by saying that the spirit testifies

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So in other words, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit testify that we belong inwardly. There is something inwardly in our spirit. He says in verse 13, by this we know that we abide in Him and He in us because He has given us His Spirit. Now, this is an interesting statement because he's saying we can know that God abides in us because God abides in us. It seems tautological, you know.

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It's a proof by a proof. But John is making a bigger point. This is not about proof. This is about God's presence in you. This is about God's presence within us and God's presence in our lives. In other words, if you have been formed according to God's Word, the theological test, if you are practicing love, you know what's right. The Spirit will testify to what is right.

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If you have been formed by the Word of God and you are practicing the faith and love, the Spirit will show you what is right. And that's how you test the spirits. The Trinitarian test is that God within you will show you. It's a little bit charismatic. And I think it's interesting because a lot of things that I grew up, I grew up Pentecostal by the way, a lot of the things

that we talked about growing up are in here. The anointing, the Antichrist, know, God within us. John is a little bit charismatic.

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He's saying that God within us is the ultimate test. God living within us, God's spirit being within us is the ultimate way to test the spirits. That we have to be formed by God's word, but we also have God living within us. You know, some of these deep fakes can be hard to tell if they're true or not. Videos, audio, images. But what's the best way to know if a

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if a fake is real or not. What's the best way to test if a picture is real, if a person is real? The best way to test it is if they're right there in the flesh in front of you. Right? How do I know it's true? How do I know if this person is saying this? The best way to know is if they're right there in the flesh, in front of you. Why is it so important that John keeps saying that Jesus Christ came in the flesh? Yes, it is because

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God giving His infinite life, becoming one of us, God with us, taking on our humanity, enables Jesus to give Himself as a sacrifice for all of humanity and redeem us. Yes, yes, yes. But I think there's also an element of this. The way we know that this is true is that He came in the flesh. And that's why it's important. He came in the flesh. The way we know that this message is real, that it's really coming from God, is that God came down

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and put aside all the deep fakes and said, here I am. I am in the flesh. This is me. This is my word. And that's how you know. Now, of course, we don't see him. We don't see him. But we rely on the testimony of those who have seen him. You know, John says, that which we have seen, that which we have handled, that which we have heard, he's making a claim here that I know this person, and he is God incarnate.

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He is God in the flesh and you can trust that because He really came and He really exists and He really resurrected from the dead and He really still is and you can trust in that message. You can trust in that word because He's real and He's in the flesh. Let's pray. Thank you for listening to this week's podcast. Please rate and review us on your podcast service and share with anyone who may be interested.

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