

*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. <sup>2</sup> This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup> but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.*

*<sup>4</sup> You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. <sup>5</sup> They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup> We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.*

*<sup>7</sup> Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:1-11)*

### **You Have Overcome the World!**

A number of years ago, the singer Sinead O'Connor was the musical guest on *Saturday Night Live!* At the end of her song, she held up a picture of the pope and shouted, "Fight the real enemy!" and tore it up. She was banned from the show for that. The next week Joe Pesci taped the picture back together and held it up to wild cheers from the crowd. Is the pope the real enemy? A few weeks ago, a pastor gave a paper to our pastors conference on persecution today. He talked a lot about the pro-gay lobby in America. Are liberals and gay rights groups the real enemy? Is radical Islam the real enemy? I grew up at the tail end of the Cold War and served in the army when the Berlin Wall was still standing. Are godless communists the real enemy? By now, you've probably figured out that I think it's more complicated than that. This morning, the Apostle John talks about the real enemy. He calls it "the world." "The world" means all the forces of unbelief and false belief that exist on this side of heaven. It means people who follow the devil even inside the visible church, people who don't believe in Christ and who actively work to stop his kingdom. We are at war with those people. But guess what? John's message to you and me this morning is that we have already won that war. You won when Christ rose from the dead. You won when the Holy Spirit planted faith in your heart. Even though it doesn't always look like it, **you have overcome the world!**

#### **I.**

Now what does that mean for our lives today? John's words are all about what it means to be winners down here where it often feels like the spiritual shooting is still going on. God wants that fact that we have already won to inspire us to be a part of the final mopping up of his enemies. Now, we don't have the power to arrest the devil and escort him to hell. We don't even have the power to change the way our society thinks and acts. But we do join in the struggle as we join together here to advance the gospel. **You have overcome the world so seek God's truth.**

John tells us this morning, **"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."** What does John mean by "spirits"? I think that many of us would think first of angels or demons. But that isn't what John is talking about here. He tells us to test the spirits because many false prophets have gone out into the world. In the Bible, a prophet is primarily a preacher. Jesus warned that many false prophets would come in the last days and would deceive many. Already in John's day, that was coming true. For as long as the church lives in this sinful world, we will have to face false teachers and false prophets. The spirits here are pastors and teachers. John tells us to test them to verify that they are really speaking God's truth and not a lie of the devil.

He tells us how to recognize a messenger who really is from God: by their teaching. Do they speak what God's Word says? John points to a specific example because that doctrine was under attack in his day. He says, **"Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have**

**heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”** At that time, the teaching about who Jesus really is stood at the heart of the difficulties Christians faced. But the principle is the same today. If you are a true follower of Christ, you need to test, to examine, whoever it is that stands up in the front of your church to make sure they are truly teaching what God’s Word says.

John says that denying the person or the work of Christ is the spirit of the antichrist. Now, what does that mean? The antichrist is the enemy of the gospel. It’s any teacher, who puts his words and ideas in the place of Christ’s words. In that sense, any false teacher is an antichrist. Certainly, any teacher that points us to our own works, any teacher that denies that Jesus is God and man, is an antichrist. But John makes it clear that there is one antichrist, *the* antichrist, who had come into the world already in his time but who was also still coming – that is, who was still going to be revealed. That one great antichrist would do more to deny the gospel and mislead the people of God than any other false teacher. Obviously, no one person has been leading people astray since the time of John. No human being lives for two thousand years. John is talking about an institution within the church that corrupts and destroys the gospel. As hard as it is for us to hear today, the Lutheran Church has always recognized that the institution of the papacy is that one, great antichrist.

All antichrists share this feature: they make us work our way to heaven. Some do it by twisting Jesus into something other than God and man. Some do it by telling us that faith alone doesn’t save you. But all antichrists try to destroy your faith. In that sense, they wage war against your soul, even now, in the shadow of Jesus’ resurrection. They refuse to give up, even though they’ve already lost the war. They create fear. They erode our faith. They make it hard for us to stand firm. It is work to test the spirits. It is so much easier to just trust that the synod knows what it’s doing and they will make sure we get a properly trained pastor. It’s easy to make excuses and say, “How can I argue with a pastor? He’s the expert!” Do you test the spirits to make sure that we are sent by God? Do you take the time to study God’s work regularly to guard your faith, to grow in your faith, to prepare your faith so you can do what God commands you to? If the answer is no, or not nearly enough, you are guilty of sin. Without even realizing it, you are sliding into hands of the unbelieving world and all its antichrists and false teachers.

But the answer isn’t to beat yourself up today. Nor is the answer to be offended at the Lutheran teaching about the antichrist and use that to avoid hearing God tell you to test the spirits. The answer is to repent, to confess to God that you haven’t fed your faith properly so you are unprepared to test those who claim to teach God’s word and then to admit that you deserve nothing but God’s wrath and punishment for that sin. Then the answer is to trust that Jesus died for you. Jesus defeated sin and death and hell at the cross for you when he said, “It is finished!” Jesus crushed the world and all its opposition to the truth and even every antichrist when he came out of that tomb. When the angel said, “He is not here, he has risen!” he was telling you that you won when Jesus won. Your sin is paid for and forgiven. And all the enemies of your faith are beaten and you will live with Jesus in heaven.

## II.

What does that victory mean to you? I hope that it means that you want to live like the winner you are. What would that look like? In this world, winners are often obnoxious. I’m a diehard Chicago Bears fan. That’s a tough thing to be in the Wisconsin Synod. Our church body is overrun with Packer fans. The fans of whichever team is winning tend to engage in behavior that makes it hard for others to consider them friends. That’s not what we’re talking about when we talk about living as winners. The victory of Christ over our own sin leads us to live in as Christlike a way as possible. **You have overcome the world so live in God’s love.**

John says, **“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”** John calls us to love because love comes from God. So if you have the love that he’s talking about here, you must be a believer. If you don’t have it, you’re not a believer. Clearly, he’s not talking about romantic love or any other kind of love that our society could generate. There are all kinds of love and we Christians don’t have a monopoly on any kind but this one. Unbelievers are often nice people. Unbelievers love their spouses and their children. Unbelievers love their country and sacrifice for the greater good.

So what love is John talking about? He says, **“This is how God showed his love among 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.”** Notice that the love John is talking about is a love that acts, that shows itself not just by being nice, but by doing what is best for us. When

John calls us to that love, he doesn't point to anything we do, but to what God has done. Before we knew him, God loved us. His love wasn't an empty feeling. It wasn't something that rose and fell with the mood he was in. God's love was a commitment to do all that we needed to get to heaven. That love sacrificed the person that he held most dear so that we could live. The Father gave his Son for us. He sent him to die. He sent him knowing the hell that he would have to experience on the cross. He sent him knowing the nails and the crown of thorns and the anguish of his Son who would cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

That love is unique to God. It is greater than any love we humans can invent, because that love gained nothing for God. When we love, we hope to be loved back. We sacrifice for people who will sacrifice for us. But God loved us knowing that the vast majority of the human race would chose to hate him and reject his gift. That's the kind of love God calls us to show. But Jesus is more than just an example of love. He is the payment for all the times and all the ways we failed to love like that. Jesus is the sacrifice that atones for all our selfishness and all our love that only seeks to gain love for ourselves. Jesus died and he paid for all that sin in our hearts and in our lives. He paid because we love ourselves more than anything or anyone else.

He wiped that sin away. When we hear that good news, God acts in love again. He gives us faith. He recreates us and puts a believer inside us. He moves into our hearts. He teaches us to love as we have been loved. All our love springs from the victory that Jesus won, on the cross where he crushed the devil and hell and sin, and in our hearts, where Jesus has crushed the sinner inside us and made us new. Every day we fight against the remnants of that sin in us. We strive to love each other, to sacrifice for one another, to put the needs and the concerns of the people around us ahead of our own personal desires and preferences.

That is what winning does for us. I just finished reading a book called *In the Ruins of Empire*. When the Japanese surrendered at the end of World War II, it caught their own soldiers by surprise. They still had six and one half million troops deployed in China, Korea, Vietnam and Indonesia. Most of those troops had never lost a battle and were dug in and prepared to fight. The book is about what happened when the allies suddenly had to figure out how to get all those armed, dug in soldiers to surrender. At first, a fair number of them didn't even believe the war was over. Many of them fought on for months after the emperor signed the official surrender on board the *Missouri*. The world we live in is very much like that. The devil didn't surrender, but he was crushed at the cross and the empty tomb. When Jesus died and rose, he defeated the devil and all his allies. He defeated the world and even the sin in our own hearts. But until he returns and openly takes possession of all that he has made, the devil, the world, and our own sinful hearts continue to resist. They can't win, but they're not going to lay down their arms. But my friends, Jesus did win. That means that you have won. You will reach eternal life, no matter how hard they make it. You won, so spend your life here seeking God's truth. You won, so live your life here reflecting God's love. Amen.