

Put Them to the Test

1 John 4:1-6

Last week, we considered how there is a significant contrast between how those of the world treat God's children and how God's children treat one another. The world will respond in hatred and opposition to believers—we shouldn't allow this fact to surprise us. God's children, on the other hand, will follow Christ's example in their love for one another. They will love fellow believers in action and in truth. It is our characteristic love for one another that serves as evidence that we have eternal life; whereas, the characteristic hatred of God's children by those who are of the world gives evidence that these folks remain in spiritual death.

Today, John presents yet another stark contrast between those of the world and those who are believers. Believers respond to the truth—they listen to the message of God proclaimed by His messengers who have the Holy Spirit at work behind their message. They adhere to the message concerning Jesus Christ that the apostles taught.

Those of the world, on the other hand, don't listen to God's messengers, but instead listen to those who speak from the viewpoint of the world. They give ear to those who have the spirit of the antichrist at work behind their message. These false teachers reject, twist, and work to destroy the message concerning Christ proclaimed by the apostles, thus exposing their anti-Christian character.

At the close of last week's sermon, we were reminded of the work of the Holy Spirit to assure us of the Lord's abiding presence within us, that we are His children—"And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us." In 1 John 4:1-6, John picks up on his mentioning of the Spirit, warning readers to make sure that it is the Holy Spirit whom they are listening to and not the spirit of the antichrist.

When a message is coming to us, supposedly to have come from God, we need to check it out to make sure it is the Spirit of God behind what is being said. How do we know whether a message is really from the Spirit of God or from another spirit? We need to apply some important tests. Let's consider together the tests John presents to help us discern whether or not the Spirit of truth is really behind what a person is saying.

Before we dive into today's text, we want to review again the central theme of 1 John. 1 John was written in order that we might enjoy fellowship with God. If we are to be in fellowship with God, we need to be like Him. We need to live a life that is in sync with who He is. The first message we learned together is that in order for us to enjoy fellowship with a holy God, we need to be holy. Last week, we began to look at the second main message of 1 John which is: If we are to be in fellowship with a God who is love, we need to love one another. In a few weeks, we will look at the third main message of the book which is: If we are to enjoy fellowship with a God who is life, then we must have eternal life through faith in Christ.

This week, we have come to what many Bible scholars believe to be a parenthetical observation. They think John is interrupting his second main message to make a parenthetical statement. I disagree.

In 1 John 5:20, John makes reference to our Lord being the true God. I think a fourth message that John communicates throughout the whole of the book related to the theme of fellowship is that if we are to enjoy fellowship with a God who is true, we must believe the truth revealed about Him in the person of Jesus Christ. John develops this fourth message in the verses we will consider today.

Read 1 John 4:1-6

Central Truth: We must carefully discern between truth from God's Spirit and falsehood from the spirit of the antichrist

The negative command: Stop trusting every spirit (1 John 4:1a)

By spirits, John is referring to supernatural beings who inspire and lead human teachers to say what they say. John doesn't want his readers to be gullible and think that every spirit claiming to be from God can be trusted. He doesn't want them to accept uncritically the messages they hear from every person claiming to be from God. He wants his readers to check out what is being said, being careful to make sure they are listening to the right spirit, that is God's Spirit!

Apparently, John's original readers have a tendency to accept some of the false things they are hearing and are not being as discerning as they should be. Perhaps there are some impressive supernatural phenomena taking place in connection with the false teaching John's reader's are hearing. This makes it look like the Spirit of God is behind what is being said.

As Hiebert warns, "It is a serious mistake simply to equate the presence of the extraordinary or supernatural with the divine." For example, were the Egyptian magicians in the book of Exodus of God? Certainly not. Whether their imitation of the miracles performed through Moses were unreal delusions or the display of real supernatural phenomena enabled by the work of evil spirits, it is clear these men did not possess or proclaim the truth. They were clearly not of God, but worked in opposition to Him.

Perhaps some of John's original audience are having an intense "warm feeling" in their hearts that has caused them to assume that what they are hearing must be from the Spirit of God. Perhaps they are experiencing something like the "burning in the bosom" that Mormons talk about. Clearly our feelings are not a good test for determining truth. How many of us have felt good about a message from a salesman only to have that feeling suddenly disappear when we start using their product? The same kind of experience will be ours if we rely on good feelings to determine the truth of what a preacher or teacher is telling us. A good feeling is not a good test as to whether the Spirit of God is behind a person's message.

Perhaps because what was taught by the false teachers sounded spiritual, it caused people to conclude it was from the Spirit of God. Again, false teachers are notorious for using spiritual phrases and terminology. They will even use Bible verses—they will twist them and use them out of context. They will sprinkle in their own texts from outside of the Bible and mix them in. They will work hard to sound spiritual and convince you they are God's spokesman. Just because something sounds spiritual does not mean it is from the Spirit of God.

Don't believe every spirit. Even if the spirit behind a person's teaching produces supernatural phenomena, gives you a warm fuzzy feeling inside, and sounds spiritual doesn't mean it should be accepted as being from God.

The positive command: Test the spirits to see whether they are from God (1 John 4:1b)

Please notice with me that it is not just the pastors or seminary professors who need to evaluate teaching to see whether or not it is from God. It is not just church leaders who are held responsible to exercise discernment in evaluating the source behind a person's preaching or teaching. Those in the pew are held responsible to do their own evaluating.

In many hobbies that involve the collection of antiques, the first thing a new collector will want to study is how to discern between a valuable, genuine antique and an inexpensive reproduction that is made to look like the real thing. To help new collectors, seasoned veterans give them a list of things to look for, of things to test, if you will, to make sure they are securing the real thing and not a fake. For example, I enjoy collecting antique marbles. Suppose I am at an antique store and a merchant wants to sell me a sulphide marble that he says is from the late 1800's or early 1900's and is in original, unpolished condition. I'm foolish if I just slap down the money on the counter and take the guy's word for it. I need to study the marble first to make sure it has all of the characteristics of a genuine antique sulphide in original condition. For example, I will look for a pontil mark. Pontil marks were made when the marble was cut off the cane (reproductions and polished marbles have smooth glass with no rough pontil marks).

Likewise, we are foolish and aren't exercising discernment if we just take a guy's word for it that he is faithfully declaring a message from God. Just because someone claims to be God's messenger doesn't mean he is. It is important that we test the spirits to determine if the Spirit of God is really behind what a person is telling us. The point of our testing the spirits from whom a speaker receives his message is to see whether they are of God or if evil spirits are inspiring what they have to say.

As we test whether a speaker is God's spokesman or not, we need to be careful to maintain, as Stotts writes, "the biblical balance, avoiding on the one hand extreme superstition which believes everything and on the other the extreme suspicion which believes nothing."

The reason our testing is necessary: Many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1c)

John is not warning his readers of some future danger that they will need to watch for down the road, but one that is upon them at the present. Apparently, it is a prevalent danger as there are many false prophets out there. They are on a mission. They are acting with purpose, going out into the world to declare their message which is motivated and inspired by evil spirits. As Smalley points out, “Whereas the orthodox followers of Jesus are sent out into the world to preach the truth, the heretics went out, as itinerant emissaries of the devil, to teach error and gain converts to their own cause.”

The first test for helping us discern if God’s Spirit is behind what a teacher is saying is to ask, “What is confessed about Christ?” (1 John 4:2-3)

How can we know if a teacher or preacher is really God’s faithful spokesman who is conveying God’s truth? We can know by evaluating what a preacher or teacher confesses concerning Jesus Christ. Does the person confess that the human Jesus is the divine Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed of God who has come in the flesh?

When teachers and preachers would affirm that Jesus Christ (Messiah) has come in the flesh in John’s day, this confession demonstrated clearly that the Spirit of God was behind what was being said. Remember, the majority of Jews rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah as did the majority of religious leaders. To affirm that Jesus is the promised Messiah, that He is God’s Anointed who has come in the flesh, was not the popular opinion. It ran contrary to the conventional religious beliefs of the day. Such a confession was sure to provoke persecution and hostility. In this cultural context and atmosphere, the test of what a person confessed about Christ was a comprehensive and determinative means of evaluating if it was God’s Spirit or evils spirits that inspired an individual to make the confessions they did. A person just wouldn’t affirm that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh if the Spirit of God wasn’t behind his affirmation.

The Greek word for confess here is a familiar one. It is the same word used in 1 John 1:9 concerning the confession of our sins. To confess is to say the same thing that God does. John uses the present tense participle to convey that the confession being made here is not simply a one time verbal acknowledgement, but an ongoing acknowledgment. The preacher or teacher who proclaims truth from God’s Spirit will characteristically confess Jesus Christ has come in the flesh as their own position.

Every spirit that does not acknowledge or confess that Jesus Christ, the Anointed of God, has come in the flesh is not of God. Those who refuse to confess Christ have the spirit of the antichrist behind what they are saying. The antichrist is coming in the future, but even now is already in the world in the sense that there are many forerunners of him who have the same evil spirits behind them and their message that the antichrist will have behind him and what he teaches when he eventually comes.

We have already addressed the fact that the supernatural, our feelings, and how spiritual a person sounds are not the basis for determining if they are from God. I would like to add here that the fact a person has glowing things to say about Jesus isn't necessarily a good test either. There are many false teachers who will have complimentary things to say about the man Jesus. We are wise to make sure we are talking about the same person when evaluating if a speaker is in fact God's spokesman. The Jesus we trust and worship is Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the Anointed of God, God Himself who has come in the flesh. Many of those who say nice things about Jesus, will deny this core truth. Such a denial demonstrates that it is the spirit of the Antichrist who is behind what they are saying. They talk about a Jesus who is foreign to Scripture, not the Jesus you and I worship and serve.

You hear a preacher or teacher who is new to you. Maybe he is really dynamic and has a powerful affect on people. Maybe he has a very large following and appears very successful. Be careful not to accept what he has to say on this basis alone. Be careful to check out if he is led and enabled by the Spirit of God or if evil spirits are behind what he has to say? Ask yourself, what is being said regarding Christ and be sure to compare what is being said with what Scripture says about our Lord.

God has spoken in the Word of God. His Word is true and presents the truth 100% of the time. His Word tells us the truth about who Jesus is. Before we entertain what a supposed spokesman of God has to say, we need to be careful to discern if God's Word agrees with what is being said.

The assurance of victory over false teachers (1 John 4:4)

Though it is apparent from John's warnings about false teachers to his original audience that to some degree or another they are being affected by them, they have overcome them. Because John's readers are from God, they have not been deceived into believing the lies of the false teachers concerning Christ. They have been able to overcome all false teaching about Christ because the one in them, the Holy Spirit, is greater than the one in the world (Satan).

A second test for helping us discern if God's Spirit is behind what a teacher is saying is to consider his audience (1 John 4:5-6)

The world listens to false teachers

False teachers are from the world. They are from the organized system of evil ruled by Satan that opposes God. Being from the world, they share the world's point of view which explains why it is those who are of the world who are listening to what they have to say.

Those who know God will listen to God's spokesman

Those teachers who are guided by the Spirit of God are from God and not from the world. Being from God, they faithfully present what God has to say which explains why those who know God want to listen to them. As John affirms in the gospel he penned about believers- "his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:4). When God's children hear His Word spoken through His spokesman, they will recognize it when they hear it and will want to listen.

Those not of God don't listen to God's spokesman

Those not of God don't want to hear the truth. They want to hear the world's ideas. They will tune out God's spokesman. They aren't interested in what he has to say.

Is a speaker of the Spirit of truth or the spirit of falsehood? How do we know? Check out who is listening to him. If the world is paying attention and likes what it hears from a speaker, he is guided by the spirit of falsehood. If the body of Christ as a whole (not just some group of Christians) is paying attention to what a speaker says because he faithfully presents the truth of God's Word, it serves as an indicator that the Spirit of truth is guiding him.

Application for today?

**Don't just blindly accept every dynamo preacher who claims to be God's spokesman—
Put'em all to the test**

Examine what a teacher says about Jesus

Does he confess that Jesus Christ, the Son of God has come in the flesh? If not, don't listen to him.

Examine who is listening

If the world is interested, we shouldn't be. If godly leaders and the body of Christ as a whole agree that the Spirit of God is guiding a preacher in proclaiming the truth of God's Word, listen to what that person has to say.

After determining whether or not the Spirit of God is guiding a teacher, then decide if you will help that individual (2 John & 3 John)

Don't help false teachers by taking them into your home or offering them a Christian greeting (2 John 7-11)

In the earlier context of 2 John, the apostle has just appealed to his readers to love one another and live in obedience to God's commands. This appeal of course echoes what John wrote in 1 John. The mutual love of believers and obedience to God's command would work to help them better recognize and reject the threat of false teachers.

Apparently, the false teachers that John warned about in 1 John 4:1-6 are many in number (2 John 7). These false teachers have gone out into the world with the mission of deceiving and leading others astray. Their heresy is the same as that mentioned in 1 John.

The false teachers John identifies do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. They are deceivers, seeking to lead people astray from the truth concerning Jesus. They are the antichrist—they are the forerunners of the one who will come in the future to oppose Christ and work to replace Christ in the hearts and minds of people. John warns his readers of the danger these teachers present in 2 John 8. They can cause believers to lose what they have worked for instead of enjoying their full reward for continued faithfulness.

These false teachers are progressive and all about moving forward. Unfortunately, they are only interested in progress for the sake of progress and not interested in abiding in the true doctrine of Christ. As Hiebert writes, "Such progress beyond the revelation in Christ...was not spiritual advancement but a fatal plunge into spiritual darkness." By their characteristic, continual failure to abide in the teaching of Christ, these teachers demonstrate that they do not have God in their life, that they are not His children. In contrast, those who do abide in Christ's teachings have the Father and the Son in their life.

In response to these false teachers when they are out in the world trying to spread their lies, John makes a statement of prohibition. Believers aren't to take into their home or offer a greeting to those who are not abiding in the teaching of Christ. Believers in this day felt it their obligation and privilege to offer hospitality to traveling Christian missionaries. John's prohibition in 2 John 10 makes clear that this obligation does not apply to those who are going around to promote a heretical, Christ rejecting message.

To open one's home to these false teachers was to provide them the needed help and platform to spread their heresy. Instead of letting them into their homes, Christians are to withhold any assistance for the purpose of working to frustrate the spread of heresy. Believers aren't even supposed to offer an expression of greeting or farewell that would imply any commonality or identification with these false teachers. Consider how we greet one another as fellow believers in Christ. I think John's point is, don't greet or say goodbye to false teachers in the same way. We need to be careful not to do anything that would identify us with false teachers or in any way assist them in their work.

How do we respond to the Mormon or Jehovah's Witness missionaries who come to the door? If you are not well grounded in your faith and in your understanding of the truth of God's Word, I encourage you to declare your faith in Christ, your commitment to the truth of God's Word, and your request that the false teachers please leave as you are not interested in what they have to say. If you are well grounded in your faith and in your understanding of the truth of God's Word, you might choose to share the true gospel with these who are deceived. This is what I have done in the past when presented with this situation. However, I don't let them into my home for a break from the cold or heat, whichever it may be. I don't offer them a cold drink. I don't offer them any physical assistance whatsoever. If anything, I want to frustrate, not help them in their work. I pray, open the Word of God, present the truth of the gospel, point out in God's Word where their teaching is in error and ask them to leave if they become argumentative.

What if we have a friend or a neighbor who is a member of a cult? Does this mean we can't have them over for dinner? Please note carefully the context of 2 John. John is addressing false teachers who are out working to promote their deception. He isn't talking about followers of false teaching who have been deceived, but aren't actively working to promote false teaching. We should treat our cult neighbors like we would any other person who needs Christ. We should show them love and pray for opportunities to share the gospel with them.

Do offer help and hospitality to those who teach the truth (3 John 5-8)

Just as we want to make it abundantly clear that we in no way identify with false teachers by our refusal to offer any form of assistance to them, we want to make it just as clear that we identify with and are committed to acting as co-workers with those who work to proclaim God's truth by offering our hospitality and help to them. The pagans who don't know God aren't going to be concerned about helping out preachers and teachers of God's Word. It is our job to demonstrate our love for our brothers in Christ by assisting them in their work. In 3 John, John's dear friend Gaius is commended for such a ministry of hospitality and help:

"Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth" (3 John 5-8).

I praise the Lord that at Jacksonville Bible Church, we have the ministry of offering help and hospitality to six different missionary families. This is the demonstration of love that God's people should be known for towards those who go out for the sake of Christ's Name & proclaim His gospel. I praise God to be a part of a church committed to working together with missionaries to spread the truth throughout the world. I pray that by God's grace, He will give us the opportunity to give even more. I dream of the day when our church is able to set aside at least 30% of its budget to missions.

I am burdened by the fact that there are missionaries who have faithfully attended and served in this church in the past who need support who we haven't yet been able to consider for support. I am burdened by the fact that some of our current missionaries are under supported. I ask that we pray together about this matter. Let us pray for the opportunity to be even more involved in the work of extending help and hospitality to those who proclaim the truth.