

Test the Spirits

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Date: 19 November 2023

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[0 : 00] 1 John chapter 4 and we're going to read verses 1 through 6. And let's read these words as if our life depends on it, because it does.

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.

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, 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. 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.

They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us.

[1 : 12] 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. Let's pray.

Great God, in highest heaven, we thank you so much that you've spoken and that you have written down your words.

Lord, they are truth. You spoke them once and wrote them down 2,000 years ago, and they're still as true today.

And they're living, Lord, because you're living. We pray now that your word would come to us and that you would cause it to penetrate our hearts, that you would produce change in our lives that would be for the glory of our Lord Jesus.

It's in his name that we pray. Amen. You may be seated. Have you ever read perhaps a label on food or on some kind of perhaps health-related product or on a toy, and the label was bold, and it was compelling?

[2 : 34] It was so bold and so compelling that it caused you to stop in your tracks and to pick up that item and to read that label again because it seems just too good to be true.

This, this is amazing. I can't believe what I'm reading. And then you look at the price, and you think, wow, this is a steal. I have to have this.

Only to then notice the little asterisk next to that bold claim. And you immediately know it is indeed too good to be true. That asterisk is telling another story.

They've made that claim on that product label, but now there is something that clearly says, wait, pause. The line between truth and error has suddenly become very blurred.

And even if you read the back of the product label to see what that asterisk was pointing you to, even that explanation is a little bit fuzzy. Like you know, okay, whatever the label is saying, too good to be true.

[3 : 37] But I'm not even sure what this explanation is really saying. They're making this confusing as well. When it comes to labels, the line between truth and lies, that can be blurred.

What we actually believe can be hard to discern. You can't take everything on the shelf at the store at face value. Truth and error.

Truth and lies. What we can trust and believe, and what we can't. It can be hard to tell the difference sometimes. Now, there are many times that it's not a big deal.

That cleaner says that it can get the grease off of your pan, and it can't. So you spent some money that you'd like to have back. Not a huge deal. You're more annoyed about it than anything else.

But there are other times where the difference between truth and error is of immense significance. When we begin to talk about spiritual matters. When we begin to seek answers to questions such as, Who is Jesus Christ?

[4 : 45] Just like the opening verses of Mark chapter 1. Or we begin to ask questions like, What has Jesus Christ accomplished? Who am I in relationship to Jesus Christ?

Those kinds of questions, we need the truth of the matter. We don't want fuzzy lines. We can't have fuzzy lines. We need to know, What is the difference?

1 John chapter 4 helps us this evening. This passage helps us to see the difference between truth and error. Now, right away in our text, John makes an assumption.

He assumes. He doesn't prove to us. He simply tells us there is a difference between truth and error. These are categories that exist. There is what is true and there is what is not true.

There is sound doctrine. There is false doctrine. There is sound teaching. There is false teaching. So we need to see, we need to affirm that these categories exist.

[5 : 52] Now that might be the easy part. Okay. We agree. They exist. Do we live like it? Do we live like there is the reality of truth and error in our world?

Is your guard up on a daily basis? Are you living as though there are lies out there that seek to lead you astray? Are you living as though the prince of the power of the air is indeed at work in the sons of disobedience?

Satan is active in the world. He is seeking to thwart God's plans. He is seeking to do harm to God's people. Do we recognize that?

Is our guard up? Or is our guard down? Are we not carefully considering all that we allow to enter into our heart and into our mind?

Are we not filtering? Are we becoming numb to all of the messages that we are bombarded with in this world? It's not so much that we are running headlong towards error, that we're seeking error out, but are we seeking to keep it out when we see it?

[7 : 06] Are we living as though there is real danger? So 1 John is a help to us tonight. It draws our attention to this reality.

There is truth. There is error. And then John is going to help us to see how we tell the difference, what the difference looks like between truth and error. So we need to do testing.

We need to put on our lab coats. We need to enter into God's laboratory and we need to conduct a test. And we need to then see the results of that test.

And we're going to see three differences tonight as we enter into God's laboratory of 1 John chapter 4. We're going to see three differences that rise to the surface. So let's look at the first difference together.

There is a difference in content. There's a difference in content. Read with me again verses beginning in verse 1. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

[8 : 14] For many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. Now these verses might sound a little bit strange to our ears at first.

Because we don't often talk about spirits. When we hear the word spirits we might naturally think of invisible, immaterial beings. We might think of like the spiritual realm as opposed to the physical realm.

And we might think of what is not flesh and blood. Or maybe you're like me and you think of a Christmas carol. And you think of those three spirits who came to Scrooge in the night.

You think of Jacob Marley clanging his chains together and crying out to prove that he really existed to Scrooge. Or maybe a real example from the Bible.

[9 : 19] We think of 1 Samuel 28. When Saul went to the witch of Endor and she conjured up the spirit of Samuel to speak to Saul.

And you might be thinking yeah I've never had that experience. That's good. We shouldn't be conjuring up the spirits of the dead. That was not what Saul should have been doing. That is not what we should be doing either.

So what is John talking about here when he tells us to not believe every spirit but to test the spirits? Is John saying that we should have some kind of interaction with spirits?

That we should communicate with spirits? That we should consult the spirits as Saul did? And if not dead living spirits? Angels? It's not exactly what John has in mind here.

Now John is certainly concerned about the supernatural but not in the very narrow sense where we think of immaterial beings. He's talking more broadly. He's talking about the spirit of the age.

[10 : 26] He's talking about what we hear, what we read, what we believe. There are spiritual forces at work to be sure. What did Paul say in Ephesians 6?

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

So yes, there are spiritual forces at work but they operate more often than not using ordinary means.

These evil spirits have a mouthpiece. False prophets. John says there, many false prophets have gone out into the world.

People who speak what is not true, who teach what is not true, who promote what is not true. Jesus talked about false prophets in his earthly ministry.

[11 : 28] Listen to his words in Matthew 7, 15. Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

And again in Matthew 24, 11. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. So what's the running theme with these false prophets?

It's not just that they say what is false though they do but it's also that their intent is to deceive. Over and over that is what's being driven home in these passages that these false prophets come in sheep's clothing.

These false prophets will lead many astray. They appear to be helpful. They are appealing but they say what is false.

They lead astray. 2 Peter 2, 1 says, But false prophets also arose among the people just as there will be false teachers among you who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

[12 : 40] So flesh and blood people with sinful natures are used by Satan to speak what is false. And so then the collective voices of these false prophets, they are getting embedded in the fabric of society so that it's not just particular individuals that we're on guard against, it is indeed the spirit of the age, the spirit of error.

It pervades, it permeates our world. Now there certainly are particular people that we should stay away from who teach what is not true.

In every age there are false prophets, false teachers who we must avoid. But in an even more subtle way the spirit of error is promoted without a name, without a face.

And it's in that sense perhaps even more dangerous. Error isn't just contained to a particular person or a movement that we can see and identify and say, I'm going to stay away from that.

It's like it's in the air. So we don't need to have an encounter with an immaterial being, a spirit, to apply this passage to our lives.

[13 : 55] We don't have to have even one particular false teacher on our minds to apply this passage to our lives. Don't believe every spirit simply means don't believe everything that you hear.

Don't believe everything that you read. Because everything that you hear, everything that you read is not necessarily of the truth. There are false prophets in the world and the spirit of error that they bring is surprisingly persuasive.

We wouldn't have these words that God gave to us if the spirit of error wasn't surprisingly persuasive. so what must we do?

We must test the spirits. And by testing, by comparing, we see the differences. And the first difference here is this substance of what is being taught.

Every spirit from God confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. And every spirit that is not from God does not confess this.

[15 : 01] In other words, throwing a Christian label on something doesn't mean that what it teaches is necessarily Christian. Saying that you believe in Jesus doesn't mean that you actually teach the truth about Jesus.

John is very clear here because the Christians that he was writing to were facing false teaching of their own. We saw this at the very outset of his letter.

They were coming up against this teaching that said the eternal son of God did not actually take on flesh. That God did not become a man. So these false teachers they were claiming to be Christian.

They were claiming to believe in Jesus. But they were teaching a different Jesus. They refused to acknowledge that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. Meaning that he's God who took on flesh.

Listen again to how John opened his letter. that which was from the beginning which we have heard which we have seen with our eyes which we looked upon and have touched with our hands concerning the word of life the word was made manifest and we have seen it and testified to it and proclaimed to you the eternal life which was with the father and was made manifest to us.

[16 : 22] Remember John said we saw Jesus. He really had a body. He really lived and he is God. Not everyone was teaching this truth about Jesus Christ.

Not everyone was confessing Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. They were saying something to the effect of he appeared as a human but God didn't actually become a man.

So they were teaching a Jesus that was suited to their own liking. We see that all around us today as well. There is a Jesus that people embrace.

It's a Jesus that's made in our own image. It's a Jesus who allows us to be lord of our own lives. A Jesus who is tolerant and accepting in every way that we want him to be tolerant and accepting.

A Jesus who loves what the world loves and hates what the world hates. A Jesus who died sure because all people die but not a Jesus who died for sinners because people are basically good.

[17 : 30] And those who are truly evil those that we might attach the label of sinner to well they shouldn't be saved. And this Jesus who died surely didn't rise again because people don't rise from the dead.

This kind of Jesus people will gladly accept because this Jesus is not the Jesus of the Bible. They confess a different Christ than the one revealed to us in Scripture.

No one argues the existence of the man Jesus Christ that he lived and died but will they confess who he has been revealed to be in the Bible that he is God who has come in the flesh.

Will they confess not just that he died but that he died rose again and has ascended into heaven. what is it that they teach?

What is it that they say about Jesus? Does it align with the truth? Because if it doesn't then this is the spirit of error. So the doctrine of Christ this is the bedrock of our faith.

[18 : 42] If we get who Jesus is wrong then we have lost the Christian faith. faith we are talking about a whole different system of belief.

So John helps us here. He helps us to remember that we have this robust true understanding of who Jesus is. And central to that is what the Bible teaches that he is fully God and fully man.

Just like we saw in Mark chapter 1. Fully God. Fully man. If he is anything less than that then whatever we are hearing it is of the spirit of error.

So that's the first difference. And it's a crucial difference. The substance of what is taught is not the same. The message is not the same.

Let's consider the second difference together. And the second difference it really builds off of the first difference. So the substance is not the same because the origin is also not the same.

[19 : 49] That's the second difference that we see here in first John. There's a difference in the origin of the teaching. Look again at verse three. This is the spirit of the Antichrist which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

Then jump down to verse five. 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. So the spirit of error has an origin.

What is false, what leads us away from the truth, what denies sound doctrine about Jesus Christ, what seeks to confuse us about him, has a source, has an origin.

It comes from the spirit of the Antichrist, John says. Now this isn't the first time that the Antichrist has come up in John's letter. Back in chapter two, verse 18, John says, children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that Antichrist is coming, so now many Antichrists have come.

[21 : 07] Then again in verse 22, who is the liar, but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ. This is the Antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.

So we've seen, even back in chapter two, this kind of already not yet tension that John is bringing out about the Antichrist, one who is coming, but yet in a way is already here.

There is this coming Antichrist, and yet many have already come. There is this spirit of the Antichrist that is already present, though you know he is coming. And what is the spirit of the Antichrist but exactly what it says, anti, against Christ, opposed to Christ, refuses to confess Jesus Christ as he truly is.

The one who denies Christ, the one who teaches that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh, the spirit of the Antichrist is at work in that person.

Many Antichrists have come, even if they are not perhaps the one described to us in 2 Thessalonians 2, the one who sets himself up against Christ, the one who claims that he himself is God and then is soundly defeated by Christ at his second coming.

[22 : 28] That is in the future. But that doesn't mean that we don't have a present danger that we must be on guard against. John teaches us that this Antichrist, he's already here in the sense that his spirit is at work.

Even if in the future he is to come as perhaps a physical person, even now his spirit is at work. Now there are lots of questions that we probably have about the Antichrist.

One of the most common ones that we have is who is this Antichrist? What's his identity? That really isn't all that important to John in this letter.

In fact, most questions that we probably have about the Antichrist aren't at the forefront of John's mind. He's less concerned with who this particular person is and he's much more concerned with telling us his spirit is at work in the world.

The false prophets that John had talked about, those who had gone out into the world, these wolves in sheep's clothing, who spread false teaching about Jesus, their message is fueled by the spirit of the Antichrist.

[23 : 39] But the message that we believe, the message that God's beloved believe, the message that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, that the eternal Son of God has come, that he might then take on flesh, die for the sins of his people, that message comes from God.

That message has an origin as well. And it comes to us in his word, which was recorded for us by men under the inspiration of the very spirit of truth.

When John says in verse six, we are from God, whoever knows God listens to us. Whoever is not from God does not listen to us.

When he says that, he's talking about the apostolic witness. He's talking about those who were set apart to record the New Testament. His words ring of John 16.

Jesus in John 16 is giving this farewell message to his disciples. And this is what he told them, beginning in verse 12. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

[24 : 53] When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears, he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine, therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

So Jesus was talking about the writing of the New Testament. He was talking about the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, who would come and who would carry along men that they might write down and record God's word to us.

So John is claiming that authority. He speaks as one specially commissioned by God. Whoever knows God will listen to John. And the other apostolic witnesses, whoever is not from God will not listen to John.

Whoever is not from God listens not to the spirit of truth, but to the spirit of error. So we have a clear testimony before us.

- [26 : 05] This here is what we listen to. Because this here is also the one who speaks to us. The spirit of truth. Not an impersonal force.
- The spirit of truth. The Holy Spirit himself. He's communicated to us in this written record. So the word teaches us truth.
- The word teaches us that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. And so this word comes to us. Its origin is from God. So as we test what we hear around us, we hold it up to the light of God's word.
- We compare it to what God's word says. We let the light of God's word guide us. Because it contains a different message.
- And it contains a message with a different origin. So that's the second difference. There's a difference in origin. That which is true. That which rightly confesses Christ.
- [27 : 09] It finds its source in God. And that which is false. Which fails to rightly confess Christ. That finds its source in Satan and in his evil forces in this world.
- Now this should sober us. This should sober us. The spirit of the Antichrist is at work in the world. As we go about our week, this very week, we will indeed encounter the spirit of the Antichrist.
- Error is all around us. This is the reality that the Bible teaches us. And that could make us very anxious. That could make us very worried.
- That could make us very fearful, concerned. It seems like evil rules the day right now. It can seem like the spirit of error is very loud sometimes in the world.
- And just like John says, the world listens to it. That can be overwhelming. That could be scary. It can seem like this spirit of error is drowning out the spirit of truth.
- [28 : 17] Like you've gone to a concert and you're trying to talk to the person next to you. And as loud as you talk, you can't hear them because that concert is so loud. That's what the spirit of error can seem like.
- all the world listens. It has quite the stage. But the third and final difference between the truth and error puts those fears to rest.
- And we see this in verse 4. There is a difference in power. Verse 4. 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. So this here, this is the comfort, this is the encouragement that we need this evening.
- And did you notice? It's the exact same comfort and encouragement that we received in just the last verses of this passage of 1 John.
- [29 : 22] Just last Sunday in the morning, at the end of chapter 3, is your heart troubling you? What was the answer? God is greater than our hearts.
- Now tonight, is the evil one and his forces, are they troubling you? God is greater than he who is in the world. John applies the same truth just to a new situation for us.
- So what's our response? Keep clinging to the word of God. Keep confidently confessing that Jesus Christ is your only hope in life.
- He is your only hope in death. Don't join the world in listening to the spirit of error. Because God is greater and you belong to him.
- What does John say here? You are from God and have overcome them for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. Little children, John says, you are children of God.
- [30 : 29] You belong to God. You are kept secure in God. And because of this, you have overcome the devil and the spirit of the antichrist and the world.

It's a done deal. John talks in the past tense for us here. It's not that you will overcome, though that is true, but he says, you have overcome.

No one, nothing stands between you and God. The full, final victory over sin and death and all of evil, it is so sure, it is so certain, it's a foregone conclusion.

You can take it to the bank. You have overcome. So look nowhere else. Turn nowhere else. Listen to no one else.

If we turn to the world and we listen to the world, if we turn to the spirit of the antichrist, the spirit of error, we will be fed what is false, what is not from God.

[31 : 35] So this isn't some great revelation from John. It's just another reminder to us that we turn to God's word to know what is true. This is our source.

when we want to know the truthfulness, when we want to know the trustworthiness, the veracity of anything that we hear, we listen once more to God's voice in his word.

Anywhere else that we turn, it will lead us astray. Don't believe every spirit, beloved. Test the spirits. See the difference in content.

See the difference in origin. And see the difference in power. there are many who speak from the world. But there is only one who speaks from the word.

And it's his voice that we listen to. It's his voice that we believe. Because his voice can't be drowned out. His voice never goes hoarse.

[32 : 36] His voice never grows faint or weary. So his voice should never grow dull to our ears. God, this same voice who spoke forth creation, who spoke, as Psalm 29 says, with power and majesty, whose voice breaks the cedars and flashes forth flames of fire, whose voice shatters the wilderness and makes the deer to give birth, whose voice utters and the earth melts, who speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.

this same God who speaks, we hear his voice in his word, and it is still full of power and majesty, full of truth.

He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. Why would we listen to any other voice? We listen to his alone.

let's pray together. Heavenly Father, what a voice we hear from you.

You have spoken to us clearly. You have spoken to us of truth. We pray Father that you would keep us in the truth.

[34 : 04] You would keep us near to the truth that we might then be able to discern what is true and what is not. Father, we recognize that we live in a world full of air.

We recognize Father that it can be surprisingly persuasive, that we can find ourselves deceived. We pray Father that you would keep us secure, that you would keep us from being deceived, that you would keep us close to your word that we might know the truth.

Heavenly Father, your word is truth. Sanctify us with it, we pray. And it's in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, the word become flesh, that we pray these things.

Amen.