

Test the Spirits

1 John 4:1-6

What John writes in today's passage is very relevant for us here today in 21st century America. You and I need to understand and digest what John is saying if we want to remain faithful to Christ for a lifetime, not just a season. In Scripture, those who persevere to the end are the ones who will experience eternal life (Matthew 10:22, 24:13, etc.).

John's readers knew people who had moved away from the apostles' teaching about Jesus and were trying to persuade them to do the same. As we discussed a few weeks ago when we studied 1 John 2:18-27, the same thing is happening in our day. Many people who were formerly part of a believing community have left the faith as revealed in Scripture and are trying to persuade Christians to do the same.

When that happens, it can be unsettling to say the least; it can even shake your faith. You can begin wondering, "What if the only reason I believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life is because I just happened to be raised in a Christian family and in a culture where Christianity is common? But if I were raised in another family and culture, maybe I'd believe that Christianity is just one more philosophy that's no better than any other."

Today's passage anticipates such modern day realities. There are many things that can lure us away from Christ (money, sex, and power being three of the most prominent). But in 1 John 4:1-6, John is concerned with seductive teachings about Christ that can lure us away from Christ. John tells us that we need two things ***if we want to be faithful to Christ for a lifetime***: discernment (verses 1-3) and confidence (verses 4-6).

Discernment. (1 John 4:1-3) In these three verses John urges his readers not to be gullible spiritually but to evaluate what people teach.

1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

When you read this verse you might be wondering, "How do you 'believe a spirit' or 'test the spirits'?" It sounds like some mystical, subjective process, but John makes clear that you "test the spirits" by evaluating the teachings you hear. He gives a very simple doctrinal test by which you can tell whether or not someone's teaching comes from God through the Holy Spirit or from the world through another spirit.

Notice that John says at the end of verse 1, "for many false prophets have ***gone out*** into the world." John is talking about the same people he mentioned in chapter 2 when he wrote that there were some who "***went out from us***," proving that they never were really "***of us***" (2:19). They hadn't merely "left a church"; they had ***left the faith***. And they were now trying to persuade others to do the same. Here John calls them false ***prophets*** presumably because - like prophets - they claimed to speak from God. But they were ***false*** prophets because the things they taught about Jesus were untrue.

In that context, John writes, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” John Stott put it well when he said, “. . . behind every prophet is a spirit, and behind each spirit [is] either God or the devil” (*The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, IVP, p.153).

In verses 2 and 3 John gives us a very simple doctrinal test to tell whether or not the Spirit of God is animating and leading any given prophet/teacher: pay very close attention to what they are teaching about Jesus Christ.

2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

To “confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” is shorthand for the gospel that John and the other apostles taught. It’s to confess that Jesus is God’s unique Son who became one of us (he was both “fully God and fully human”) to die on the cross for our sin. Jesus “coming in the flesh” was God’s eternal plan for restoring humanity and therefore all of creation. Jesus coming in the flesh isn’t some asterisk in human history; it’s the most significant event in all of history.

Therefore, if someone legitimately confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, you can be sure they are from God and have been led by the Spirit of God. By contrast, we see in verse 3:

3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

Here John is advancing the point he made in chapter 2 when he mentioned that “many antichrists have come” into the world. Again he is referring specifically to those who had left the believing community and were trying to lure others away from Christ. Because they were anti- (or against) Christ as he revealed himself, they were “antichrists.”

Here in 4:3, John’s point is that these false prophets were being led by “the spirit of the antichrist” and not the Spirit of God. As he did in chapter 2, John reminds them that this shouldn’t come as a surprise; they had already heard that antichrist was coming. Now, John says, he “is in the world already” through these false prophets. John had been present when Jesus said this (Matthew 24:24-25):

24 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. 25 See, I have told you beforehand.

John was able to warn his readers because Jesus had warned *him* beforehand about false Christs and false prophets.

Why was John so fired up about all of this? Why would he care what people who had left the church say about Jesus Christ? One reason John was so passionate about all of

this because people were lying about his best friend; they were saying things about Jesus that simply were not true. Another reason is because what you believe about Jesus has eternal consequences.

Remember from 1 John 1 that John had seen Jesus with his eyes, heard him with his ears, and touched him with his hands. He had experienced things with Jesus that almost nobody else had (he was in elite company on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus, Moses, Elijah, Peter, and James). When Jesus was hanging on the cross, Jesus gave John the assignment of taking his mother into his household as his own mother (Jesus said to Mary, "Woman, behold your son". . . and to John, "Behold, your mother" - John 19:25-27).

So when people went out from them and denied that Jesus was the unique Son of God who had made the infinite journey from heaven to earth and who died on the cross for our sin at an infinite cost to himself, John didn't think, "Well there's an interesting perspective on an important historical figure. . ." John thought, "They're lying about my best friend (who also happens to be the sinless Son of God who *alone* gives eternal life)!" They were false prophets who were being empowered by the spirit of antichrist.

Significantly, at this point John doesn't tell his readers to "Be afraid. . . be very afraid." He doesn't tell them to live their lives in fear, as if losing your faith is as easy as falling off a log. Rather, he tells them to be confident because none of this is a surprise to the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit.

Confidence. (1 John 4:4-6) Beginning in verse 4 John explains how our confidence is in God who indwells us and leads us through this life. Notice how directly John addresses them (and us) as believers:

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.

I think it might be helpful to work our way backwards from the end of the verse. John says that the reason you have "overcome" the false teachers is, "for [because] he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." The One who is *in* believers is the promised Holy Spirit (1 John 4:13). This is exactly what Jesus had promised John and the other disciples. He said that he would not leave them as orphans but would send the Spirit of truth to dwell within them (John 14:15-17). The Spirit of God and of Christ within them is "greater than he who is in the world," namely, the spirit of the antichrist. The Spirit of God is greater than the devil in every category: he is smarter, wiser, more powerful, more fierce, etc. If the Spirit of God is within you, you have nothing to fear.

His presence in our lives is why we as believers "have overcome" the false prophets and their teachings; the Spirit of God has won the battle in our hearts. He assures us that the gospel is true and that we would be foolish to abandon Christ for another gospel.

In biblical thought you only have two options: either you are from the world or from God. That simple understanding will explain many, many things in this life. In verses 5 and 6 John writes that that understanding explains why some people “listen to” false prophets and other people listen to him (and the other apostles).

5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.

Those who had left the believing community weren't true prophets from God; they were false prophets “from the world.” Being from the world, they spoke the language of the world. That's why the world listens to them (in the sense of hearing and receiving their message) - because they're speaking their native tongue; they speak ideas and perspectives that make sense to a heart not submitted to God.

By contrast, John wrote in verse 6:

6 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.

John, the other apostles, and all genuine believers **are** from God. Therefore, “whoever knows God” listens to **them** (not the false prophets). Because they were speaking the words of Jesus and because they were telling the truth about Jesus, their message resonated deeply with those who know Jesus. This was one of Jesus' main points in John 10 when he described his ministry as the good shepherd: “My sheep hear [my] voice . . . [I] call them by name. . . they simply will not follow another” (John 10:1-30).

Those who are “not from God” (but from the world) do NOT listen to John (Jesus said something very similar in John 8:47). Don't let it shake your confidence because so many don't listen to the Scriptures or to you. True disciples of Jesus have been a minority in every generation. We don't need to change the gospel or anything else in Scripture to make it more acceptable to the world; we need to embody the Scriptures so that people can see the beauty and power of the gospel.

John concludes by restating the reason for writing this paragraph: “By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” Namely, you evaluate a person's doctrine about Christ and whether or not they listen to the apostles' teachings as preserved in our New Testament Scriptures. Those who believe that Jesus came in the flesh and who listen to the Scriptures have the Spirit of truth. Those who deny Christ and disregard the Scriptures are from the world and have the spirit of error.

As I mentioned earlier, this encouragement to “test the spirits” is as relevant today as it was in John's day. Consider a couple of applications:

First, **know the Christology of those who might influence you spiritually.** In other words, know what they really believe about Jesus Christ. Don't be naive and think that everybody who talks about Jesus believes that He is the unique Son of God who became one of us to die for our sins. If they don't, they are not from God but from the

world. It's not that they're necessarily wrong about everything; they may have some interesting and insightful things to say about human nature and about societal issues. But if we become loyal to them and then find out that they are denying core truths about the person and work of Christ, you might find your heart being lured away from "a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (as Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 11:3). "Test the spirits" to see if a teacher is from God or from the world.

Please understand that today's passage isn't about becoming combative about every little detail of doctrine; it's not about putting people in their place or winning arguments. Those things are trivial compared to John's concern. John was concerned that his spiritual children walk with Jesus for a lifetime. He didn't want them to be deceived and lured away from Christ. That's the issue for us as well. Therefore we have to be discerning about those who might influence us. Do they confess the truth about Christ or are they lying about him?

Second, ***prioritize learning from God through the Scriptures*** (instead of relying on what other people say about God and the Scriptures). Teachers are important in the body of Christ; but teachers (myself included) are no substitute for learning directly from the Scriptures themselves. There aren't any hard-and-fast rules for this, but I encourage people to spend ***at least*** as much time in the Scriptures as you spend listening to others talking about the Scriptures (books, blogs, podcasts, etc.).

When I was in seminary, Dr. Walter Kaiser told a room full of us, "My father didn't graduate from high school, but he has a better theology than most of you will have when you graduate with a Master degree. Why? Because he has read the Bible from cover to cover once a year for the last 60 years." I'm not suggesting that you have to read the entire Bible from cover to cover every year (I don't). The point is that if you marinate your heart and mind with the Scriptures like that, you'll find it relatively easy to spot false teachings and to dismiss all sorts of ideas that might lure you away from a pure and sincere devotion to Christ for a lifetime.