

Test the Spirits

Good morning. If you have your Bible, I invite you to open it to the book of 1 John. We have been slowly walking through this letter in the New Testament. Today, we will be spending our time focusing on the first 6 verses of chapter 4. If you are using a Bible under the chairs, you can find it on page 959. We also have the passage (and sermon notes) available on our church app under the “Live” tab on the bottom.

Last week, we left off with looking at the assurance we can have in our salvation. That when our heart condemns us, God is greater than our hearts. The end of that section talks about this mutual abiding between the believer and God. We abide in God, and God abides in us. And John says that we **know** that he abides in us because he has given us the Spirit of God.

But John anticipates that this might raise some questions in the mind of these believers. And maybe you have had these questions before: If all Christians have the Spirit of God, then how do we know who is speaking the truth? How can there be so many differences of interpretation and how can we know who is right? If people claim to have the Spirit of God, is everything they say from God? How can we determine whether something someone says is true or false?

These are the questions John seeks to answer before they are asked. Would you follow along as I read 1 John 4:1-6?

READ 1 John 3:24-4:6

Would you pray with me?...

INTRODUCTION

[ILLUSTRATION]

Not everyone who speaks of God, speaks from God. This is pretty evident when you hear pop songs on the radio. Songs like: “Take Me to Church” by Hozier. Or “Holy” by Justin Bieber. While these songs have lyrics that mention religion and even sound spiritual, they could not be further from talking about spiritual truths from Scripture.

This is even true when you scroll through social media and see popular sayings shared. There are all kinds of sayings and phrases passed around on social media and even within the church that sound spiritual, maybe even mix with some Bible passages, and yet teach things that are contrary to Scripture. Maybe you have heard of these before. Maybe you have even said them. But a little closer examination of them exposes their error.

Common Phrases:

1. God helps those who help themselves.

- Actually, God constantly remarks about how he will help with widow and orphan, the defenseless and helpless. We are all in trouble if God only helps people who help themselves. This is the opposite of what the gospel teaches. God saves us because we cannot save ourselves. Charles Spurgeon stated, “God helps those who **cannot** help themselves.”

2. God will never give you more than you can handle.

- This sounds true and comforting to encourage us that life won’t be **too** hard for us. But in reality, God **will** give you more than you can handle, so that you lean on and rely on him. This is probably a misunderstanding and misquoting of **1 Corinthians 10:13** which says: “¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” Paul says you will not be tempted beyond your ability because God will provide a way of escape. But this doesn’t mean we won’t face trials and hardships in

our life greater than we can handle. Just look at Paul's own life. We will, so that we must rely on God.

3. Money is the root of all evil.

- Again, this is so close to Scripture but leaves off an important distinction. **1 Timothy 6:10** says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils." It's not that money is evil, but the **love** of money is the root of all kinds of evils.

4. Let go and let God.

- That sounds nice, and it does emphasize the idea of surrender to God. If we are talking about justification (being declared righteous before God and no longer guilty), then yes. Let go and let God. But often it's used for sanctification (working out our salvation) as an excuse to not get busy pursuing holiness. J.I. Packer once said, "The Christian's motto should not be 'Let go and let God' but 'Trust God and get going.'" We should do as Paul tells us and work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

5. You're never more safe than when you're in God's will.

- Again, I think I understand the sentiment of this, that we want to follow God's will, and we can trust him in his plan for us. But the idea of safety, especially in our American context, is this idea that when we are in God's will, we won't be harmed. We won't face persecution or even death. Jesus actually taught the opposite in the Gospels, that you will be hated and suffer for his name's sake. Justin Martyr in the 2nd century said, "They can kill us, but they cannot harm us." This is a radical statement that only Christians can make. God does not promise us physical safety, but he does promise us eternal life.

If we remember back in chapter 2, John told these believers that they don't need to be taught by anyone because they have the Spirit. And now, at the end of chapter 3, he has assured them that true believers have been given the Spirit as assurance of their abiding in God. But with these truths, it is easy to see how these questions of validity can arise. If someone claims to have the Spirit of God,

then how can we be sure that what they teach is the truth? Is there a way to determine truth versus error? There is.

Look at verse 1:

1 John 4:1

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.

John tells them in verse 1 not to believe everything that everyone says, but rather to “test the spirits.” Now look at the end of verse 6:

1 John 4:6

...By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

John says that they can know the Spirit of truth versus the spirit of error. What he says in between these verses is how to do that, how to test the spirits. How to determine the Spirit of truth from the spirit of error.

The main point for this morning is this: Every Christian should examine every teacher to confirm truth and expose error.

To do this, John gives us four things we should do in examining in these teachers: We should 1) Examine Their Teaching, 2) Examine Their Worldview, 3) Examine Their Influences, and 4) Examine Your Victory.

EXAMINE THEIR TEACHING

Let's consider the first step in this examination of teachers. We must first

Examine Their Teaching.

As John has mentioned earlier in the letter in chapter 2, there are antichrists in the world who are actively opposed and trying to deceive those in the church. Here in verse 1, John again reminds them that there are false prophets, false teachers, who have gone out into the world. But even more than that, there are spirits aligned with the antichrist who are at work in the world. So, how do we know who speaks truth and who speaks error? How do we know when someone is speaking from the Spirit of God versus the spirit of the antichrist? John says in verse 2 that this is how to know the Spirit of God: by what they confess, what they teach about Jesus.

Look at verses 2 and 3:

1 John 4:2-3

² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.

John gives the truth versus the error: what is from God and what is not from God. He says you can know it is from God if they confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. John is very specific here about the confession, the teaching, being made about Jesus. Pastor Nathan mentioned last week about believing the in name of the Son Jesus Christ, saying that it means to believe that “Jesus is God, that He saves, and that He is King.” Now John adds even more clarity to this by stating that one must believe and confess that Jesus has come in the flesh.

It's not good enough to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. That Jesus is King. That Jesus is fully divine. But we must believe that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. That he dwelt among us. That Jesus is also fully human. John begins his Gospel account by focusing on the divinity of Christ (“the Word was with God and the Word was God”) and continues to expand on that throughout the Gospel. But he says in chapter 1:14:

John 1:14

¹⁴ And the Word **became flesh and dwelt among us**, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John begins this letter by acknowledging and confessing that Jesus has come in the flesh. Look again at chapter 1:

1 John 1:1-3

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— ² the life was made manifest, and **we have seen it**, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— ³ that which we **have seen and heard** we proclaim also to you.

Not only is Jesus fully divine, but Jesus is fully human. Throughout church history, there have been attempts to argue for Jesus being only divine. That he only “appeared” to be human. He took on a human form or image, but he himself was not really or truly human. But the church has continued to denounce this as heresy, claiming that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Jesus Christ is one person with two natures: a human nature and a divine nature.

Now you may think that this is too much theological stuff or even church history for a Sunday morning. You may even be asking, “So what? Does this really matter?” And I would say, “It absolutely does.” For one reason, John argues in the rest of verse 3 that those who claim this very thing, that Jesus has not come in the flesh, are not from God.

1 John 4:3

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.

Those who deny that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man are not being led by the Spirit of God (the Spirit of Truth) but are being led by the spirit of the antichrist (the spirit of error). But another reason it is so vitally important to believe that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man is because our hope in the gospel hinges on this truth. Stay with me here.

If Jesus is only divine, then he cannot truly identify with us or be the sacrifice for our sins. Just as the blood of animals could not fully atone for the sins of man, neither could the sacrifice of a divine being. Humanity has sinned. A human must pay the penalty for that sin. As one church father, Gregory of Nazianzus said, “That which he has not assumed he has not healed.” If Christ did not take on flesh, then Christ did not heal flesh, he did not save it. Or as a more recent theologian has said: “Jesus could only represent humans if he became a human—a real human. And if he cannot represent us, then he cannot redeem us.”

But Christ did more than just represent us. He actually experienced a human life from beginning to end, from birth to death. He can sympathize with us. Hebrews 4:15 says:

Hebrews 4:15

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

However, if Jesus was only human, and not also divine, then he could not take on the infinite wrath of God on behalf of sinners. If Christ was only human, he could not offer a sacrifice that could fully atone for the sins of mankind, nor could he defeat death by rising from the dead, applying the benefits of that sacrifice to us. One author helpfully summarized this by saying: “[Jesus] had to be truly human: in order to suffer and sympathize. [Jesus] had to be truly divine: in order to satisfy and secure.”

So, I come back to the question, “Is this even important for us today?” It absolutely is. Because our entire hope in the gospel (the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, our salvation) depends on Jesus being both fully God and fully man. The church fathers understood the weight of this truth. And John writing to these believers understood the importance of this truth. John says that if someone does not confess Christ in the flesh – Jesus being fully God, fully man – they are not from God.

There are cults today, actively teaching, this very thing. The Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that Jesus was created by God as the archangel Michael and as the first created thing. They would quote John 1 and say that “the Word was *a* god” not “the Word *was* God.” He is a powerful and mighty lowercase g, god. They believe that when Jesus was born on the earth, he was a mere human, not God in human flesh. Mormons claim that “Heavenly Father” (how they refer to God) had a physical relationship with Mary which produced Jesus. He was a human who grew up to eventually become a god (again, lowercase g), rather than being the eternal Son of God who took on flesh. This is only one of many differences we have with these cults, but it starts by denying that Jesus is fully God and fully man.

But even more than these cults, our culture at large has no problem with a human Jesus, especially a baby Jesus. As Christmas approaches, we see all kinds of people singing Christmas carols about this baby Jesus or putting up nativity scenes and decorations. Around Easter, you will see documentaries all over TV about the “historical” Jesus. The world is “okay” maybe even indifferent to the idea of Jesus as a human. What the world doesn’t want to celebrate or affirm is the fully-divine, fully-human Savior of mankind.

Who are you believing in? Jesus Christ, the God-man: fully God and fully man? Or some other Jesus. Those who have the Spirit of God confess and believe in this Jesus Christ because it is through his humanity and divinity that we have hope in his life, death, and resurrection.

If you are not trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, let me urge you to repent of your sins and trust in this Jesus alone for salvation. Cry out to God in prayer, acknowledging that you have broken God's commands and stand guilty before him. Believe that Jesus Christ, this God-man, accomplished what you could not do: that he lived a perfectly obedient human life, that he died as a sacrifice on the cross as a substitute for you, bearing your sins on the cross to pay the penalty you deserve, and that he rose again from the dead, claiming victory over sin and the grave. For those who trust in Christ for their salvation, he offers eternal life. Repent and believe in Jesus Christ who has come in the flesh.

For Christians in the room, let us be careful not to think we have graduated or outgrown the need for the gospel. The Holy Spirit will never lead us to believe we no longer need the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came in the flesh. Anyone who claims that we have evolved beyond the gospel of Christ in the flesh cannot be of the Spirit. There is no hope in a religious system. There is no hope in morality. There is only hope in the God-man, Jesus Christ.

John wants to warn these believers about those who deny the truth of Christ. Those who do not confess Jesus Christ in the flesh are not speaking truth. They do not have the Spirit of God. The first way to test the spirits is to examine what they are teaching.

EXAMINE THEIR WORLDVIEW

Not only do we need to examine what someone is teaching, but we need to also **Examine Their Worldview.**

In verse 4, John says:

1 John 4:4

⁴ Little children, you are **from God**...

And again, in verse 6:

1 John 4:6

⁶ We are **from God**...

And in verse 5, he says:

1 John 4:5

⁵ They are **from the world**; therefore they speak **from the world**...

There is a distinction between where someone is coming from.

[ILLUSTRATION]

You can tell a lot about someone based on where they are from, can't you? It could be an accent, or certain words or phrases used, or even certain values people hold. Moving here to Indiana over 8 years ago, Hannah and I learned a lot about the Midwest and you Hoosiers. There are things we started to notice that were different than where we grew up.

Up here, a lot of people talk about grabbing the "sweeper" to clean the room. I'm sitting there thinking they are talking about maybe a broom? Nope, apparently that's a vacuum cleaner around here. People would say they would go to the store and grab the pop. Well, down South (especially in GA) all soda is called Coke. You go to a restaurant and say, "I'll have a Coke." And they would say, "What kind?" And then of course, when there is a gathering of a bunch of people and you address them all, you say, "You all." But in GA, we take the lazy way out and say, "Ya'll."

But this even extends to favorite teams and even sports. Apparently, basketball is a big deal around here. But down south, Football is everything. Up here there is something called the Big 10. Down south, there is really only one conference, the SEC. When you talk to people, a lot is revealed about where they come from. And where they come from affects who they are and what they believe.

And here in our passage, John wants these believers to examine these teachers and ask, “Are they coming from God or from the world?” I think a helpful way to think about this is with the term worldview. What worldview are they operating from? Are they operating from a Christian worldview or some other worldview?

In simple terms, a worldview is a philosophy of life or conception about the world. What you believe about the world, the purpose of life, the purpose of mankind, and so forth. What you believe about these fundamental truths will determine how you choose to live and operate in the world, what decisions you make. Everyone lives their lives and operates in the world through a worldview.

If you operate from a worldview, where people are the bi-product of chance and chemical reactions, then people have no inherent dignity and value. There is no clear definition of what constitutes a human life with dignity and rights and what constitutes a clump of cells. Which lead to decisions regarding abortion. This clump of cells inside a woman has no inherent dignity or rights, therefore it is okay to eliminate it.

If you operate from a worldview where “love” is ultimate and trumps everything else, where love is love, and any expression of love should be affirmed and even celebrated, then you operate your life and make decisions around who you can be in a relationship with, who can be married, how you can express that love in any form or fashion, which leads to the LGBTQ+ movement and ideologies and even a hook-up culture. If love is ultimate, then my expression of love is also ultimate.

If you operate from a worldview where there is no life after death, all that matters is the life you have now on this earth, then you are going to live for today. You are going to try and make your life as comfortable and as pleasurable as you can while you are here. This leads to gluttony, drunkenness, sexual idolatry, accumulation of possessions, overworking, and a host of other things. Our worldview shapes and informs how we live.

While everyone has a worldview (because we are all making decisions and living with some sort of premise), not everyone is aware of their worldview or have thought it all the way through. But as Christians, we are to engage our minds, study the Scriptures, and align our thinking to the truths of God's Word.

And John is saying, these people who are from the world, speak as if they are from the world. Do not be surprised when an unbeliever speaks and acts like an unbeliever. They are operating from a completely different worldview than a Christian. They are coming from a different place. Their starting point is different.

How does this practically help us? I think it helps us in our evangelism and engagement with those in our culture. If we are seeking to share the gospel and the hope of Christ with others, we need to be aware that they are probably coming from a completely different starting point than we are. Using Christian lingo and terms and making a B-line to the gospel presentation might be more confusing to them than helpful.

One book I read (called Tactics) on engaging people in evangelism spoke about leaving pebbles in people's shoes, asking questions that poke holes in their worldview, using rational arguments to persuade people. Paul did this. Go read Acts! He is constantly making arguments, explaining things, and being persuasive in his appeal to Gentiles. When Paul was in Athens, he saw the idolatry, recognized the worldview of those he was around, and reasoned with them. He found commonality with them in their worldview but then exposed its error or weakness and proceeded to argue for Christ. I'm not saying that people get saved apart from the Spirit's work in their heart, but the Spirit uses rational arguments in the Scriptures.

So, as we examine the claims of others, where are they coming from? What worldview is being expressed in what they teach? Is it from a biblical, Christian worldview, a secular worldview, or some another religious worldview? As we test the spirits, the teachings of others, we must determine where they are coming from.

EXAMINE THEIR INFLUENCES

In our efforts to know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error, we must examine a person's teaching, their worldview, and we must **Examine Their Influences.** Who are these people listening to? Who are they agreeing with?

Look again at verses 5 and 6:

1 John 4:5-6

⁵They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us.

Here we see John switch from second person (you, you all) to first person (we, us). John is identifying with those who have stayed in the church, assuring them that they are siding with God and John's apostolic authority. And the fact that they are continuing to listen and abide by his apostolic teaching reveals that they are from God. Those who know God continue to abide in God and continue to follow his teaching. It makes sense. You hear God's teaching, understand it, and accept it.

However, for those who are not from God, they do not understand his teaching. It seems foolish. They reject it. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:

1 Corinthians 1:22-24

²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The gospel message seems like folly: irrational, illogical, and ridiculous to those who do not have the Spirit of God. But for those who have the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth, we know that it is the power of God and the wisdom of God. As Paul says in Romans 1, “it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

We have all sorts of voices and messaging thrown at us all day, every day. Social media filled with influencers and people seeking to gain your attention and have your ear. They want you to listen to them about what products to buy, what diet works, how to decorate your home, how bad America is, how you should raise your kids, how you should live your life, and even what you should believe about God.

[ILLUSTRATION]

The social media algorithms are actually designed to feed you more of what you want. The more you click on, watch, comment on, linger on a post, the more sponsored content you will have show up in your newsfeed.

I don’t actually have the social media apps on my phone anymore, but occasionally (every few months or so) I will get on Facebook on my laptop to see if I have any notifications or anyone trying to reach me. As I scroll a few minutes down the newsfeed, all I see are sponsored ads for things. I probably only see about 1 or 2 posts from friends and the rest is sponsored content.

Now, I like Star Wars and Marvel movies, and that is pretty much all that I am blasted with. Every post is about some Marvel movie or Star Wars thing that came out or is coming out. But the same can be true of political posts or religious posts. What happens on social media is that you get lost in an echo chamber. Meaning, you are constantly bombarded with content and information that affirms and supports your interests and your viewpoint. There is never any opposition or challenge to what you believe.

The question becomes, who are you listening to? Do you listen to the world over Scripture? What is interesting about our passage in 1 John is that John is writing to a group of believers who stayed in a particular local church. They didn't leave the church. They didn't follow after the teaching of those outside the church. And it's because they stayed in the church, they listen to the teaching of John and his apostolic witness, that John says they will know the truth and expose the error.

One of the reasons why the local church is so important is to guard against false teaching in the world, and even false teachings that arise in our own hearts and minds. Paul tells us in Colossians to "teach and admonish one another" as we sing. We gather together as a local body of believers to teach one another and correct one another as we sing. We are pointing each other to the truth as it is revealed in God's Word, encouraging one another in the truth and correcting one another away from what is false. We are breaking down the echo chamber we each want to live in and are being conformed to God's Word.

We must be careful about who we are listening to. John says that an identifying marker of someone who is speaking from the spirit of truth will be that they listen to the teachings of the apostles. They will listen to Scripture. They are influenced by God and his Word, not the world.

EXAMINE YOUR VICTORY

Now, I know what you may be thinking, "Wow. This seems hard." Right? With all the messaging we are bombarded with, with all the half-truths out there, with people actively out there trying to deceive us, and the spirit of the antichrist in the world opposing us, how can we do this? John, in such a wonderfully pastoral way, encourages these believers. He knows that this sounds like a lot to handle, that it seems insurmountable because the spirit of the antichrist is out there trying to deceive. He wants these believers in the church to **Examine Your Victory.**

Look at verse 4:

1 John 4:4

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.

John wants to remind these believers and us not to be afraid. Do not fear the spirit of the antichrist. Do not fear the lies and deception. Remember this truth: you have overcome them! You already have the victory! And where does this victory come from? Does it come from within ourselves? Does it come from us mustering up the strength and faith to fight? No. He says, “for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” Jesus said in John 16:33:

John 16:33

³³ “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! **I have overcome the world.**”

What’s interesting about this passage is this is the night of Jesus’ arrest. Jesus tells the disciples that they will be scattered and experience hardship, and Jesus himself is about to undergo suffering and death on a cross. But Jesus proclaims that he has overcome the world. What Jesus is saying to his disciples and what John says here in this letter is not that we won’t experience suffering, that we won’t face opposition, or that we won’t experience difficulties, but that in the midst of all of it, we can be assured of who has the ultimate victory.

Jesus has already won the victory over Satan and all the authorities in the heavenly places through his death and resurrection. He has overcome the world: the philosophies and ideologies of the day, the spiritual forces at work, and even Satan himself. And now the Spirit of Christ dwells in believers. We too have overcome. We have the victory. Not through our strength and might or some faith we muster, but through Christ in us. We overcome because Christ has overcome for us.

This comes in the context of John already assuring the salvation of those who are actively living and pursuing a life in Christ. Those who follow God's commands, love their brother, and listen to the teachings of God, are those who are truly saved, who have the Spirit of God in them, and who will reject and expose false teaching, cling to the truth, and persevering to the end.

CONCLUSION

As we encounter different teachings and claims, we must be on guard, we must be careful to examine the truth of those claims and expose what is false. As Christians, we need to filter everything through the lens of a Christian worldview and the truth of God's Word.

Let's be slow to reshare some "spiritual" post on Facebook. Let's be slow to believe everything a pastor or influencer says on social media. Let us all have a healthy amount of skepticism as we engage with the world.

Every Christian should examine every teacher to confirm truth and expose error.

Would you pray with me?...

COMMUNION

I'm going to invite the deacons and band to come up. This morning, we have read the Word, sung the Word, prayed the Word, and preached the Word. And now we have an opportunity to see the Word as we take the Lord's Supper. As we take the Lord's Supper together, we are proclaiming the gospel to one another. We are confessing that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, and it is through his human body that was broken for us, that our sins have been forgiven.

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance of the church, commanded by Christ for those who are born-again believers. If you are saved by the gospel as you have heard expressed and proclaimed this morning, then we invite you to join us in taking the elements. However, if you are not a believer, if you have not trusted in Christ alone for the forgiveness of your sins, then we ask that you heed the warnings of Scripture about taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner and refrain from partaking of the elements. And instead, I urge you to consider your own need for the forgiveness of your sins and call you to hope in the gospel that has been proclaimed today in the message and in the Lord's Supper. Repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

In a moment, I will ask Deacon _____ to lead us in prayer for this time. The deacons will begin passing the plates. There will be two cups stacked on each other, the bottom one with the bread and the top one fill with juice. The bread is gluten free, and the juice is grape juice. You will take one stack of two cups as the trays are passed. Please hold those and wait until everyone has been served. We will sing together during this time. Once everyone has been served, I will lead us in taking the bread and the cup together as a sign of our unity in Christ.