

A Call for Discernment: The Christian Faith is Not Spiritual Gullibility

1 John 4:1-6

Intro: Wise Love

As I was thinking and praying about filling the two-week gap in the preaching schedule, I was struck by back-to-back passages in 1 John. The one we just read, calling for discernment, and the next passage (vv7-12), calling for love.

The two are not mutually exclusive. They go together. Love must be guided by truth because it is unloving not to be truthful. But truth must be given in love because it can be weaponized without it. As a teacher of mine once said, “Truth without love is harsh, but love without truth is mush.”

The call of the Christian life is wise love. That’s my goal for these next two sermons, that we might grow in wisdom and love.

A Call for Discernment

Our focus this morning is on wisdom. All of us have room to grow in discernment. That’s the main exhortation in this passage. **[v1a]**

There were people in the church to whom John is writing who claimed to speak on behalf of the Spirit of God. And John is saying, “They are, indeed, speaking on behalf of a spirit, but the spirit may not be God’s Spirit.”

Why do you need to know the difference? **[v1c “many false prophets”]** They’re all over the place! That was true in that day, how much more is it the today. We have access to false teaching in our pockets! So many Christians are disciple by TicToc and YouTube more than they are God’s Word.

The point of this passage is: “Don’t believe every spirit. Don’t believe everything you hear! Don’t be gullible! Be discerning!

Now, this not a call for judgmental suspicion of everyone and everything. Next weeks’ passage provides balance: you still gotta love people! But you also must be discerning. How? **[v1a-b, “test”]** You must test where the teaching is coming from. Is it coming from the Spirit of God or the spirit of the antichrist (v3)? Those are the two options in this passage.

John provides two tests to determine the source of teaching you hear that claims to be teaching from God: 1) The Gospel Test and, 2) The Biblical Test. First consider...

1) The Gospel Test [v2a]

“What I’m about to say is one way you know the Spirit of God.” It’s interesting, he doesn’t merely say, “This is how you know whether a *teaching is from* the Spirit of God.” He says, “This is how you *know the Spirit of God.*” We gotta know God’s Spirit. We gotta know him personally, intimately so that we can recognize his voice.

Now, this is not talking about inner impressions, or subjective guidance. “Is this the Spirit of God talking to my conscience, giving me a sign on what I should do next.” This is talking about evaluating actual words from other people who claim to be giving you words from God.

You gotta know God’s Spirit (the third person of the Trinity) to know whether words claiming to be from him are from him.

I remember one time there a member in our church received a text message claiming to be another member in our church. And it was highly inappropriate text message that included swear words and such.

And the member reached out to me and said, “Why would so and so text me like this?” I don’t know but that doesn’t sound right. That doesn’t sound like this person at all.

So I asked what number it was that text this person, I looked up the number in the church directory, and it didn’t match. Someone was posing as a member of our church. It was very obvious, “That’s not the person I know.”

You see? Knowing someone—who they are, what they’re all about—helps you discern whether words claiming to be spoken on their behalf are truly from them. What do we know about the Spirit of God. How do you know him?

Repeatedly in the NT, what we know about him is that he loves to point our attention to Jesus Christ. John 16:14, Jesus said, “He will glorify

me.” John 15:26, “When the Helper comes...he will bear witness about me.”

The primary job of the third person of the Trinity is not to give you subjective impressions on decision-making. He’s main job isn’t to give you peace about whether you picked the right college or career.

The main job of the Holy Spirit is to point your attention to Jesus Christ. And therefore, any word claiming to be from Him that distorts or contradicts who Jesus is or what he came to do, then it is not from the Spirit of God. And this is exactly the point John is making. **[v2-3a]**

The original readers of this letter were being fed a version proto-gnostic teaching that viewed the material world as evil, but the spiritual/immaterial world as good. And that’s why they denied Jesus literally came in the flesh. How could the Son of God take on human flesh, if human flesh is inherently bad?

So they said, “Jesus only *appeared* to look human, without actually becoming human.”

One of the first heresies in church was not a denial of the deity of Jesus; it was a denial of the true humanity of Jesus. Yes...to say, “Jesus is *not* truly God,” is heresy. Jehovah Witnesses believe that, and it’s damnably wrong!

But you know what else is equally wrong? To say that Jesus wasn’t truly human! Why? Think about it: if Jesus did not truly take on human flesh, then he did not truly represent humanity before God. It was humans, after all, who sinned against God, and humans, therefore, deserved punishment.

So if Jesus was going to take the punishment for humans, he needed to become a human! And the punishment was death on a cross! Spikes cannot be driven through spiritual hands. A crown of thorns cannot be shoved on a spiritual head. Suffocation cannot overtake spiritual lungs. Jesus had to become human. Anyone who says otherwise is not speaking on behalf of God.

Now, John is not giving an exhaustive Gospel Test here. He’s centering the readers’ attention

on Jesus and filtering the specific teaching they're receiving through the lens of what they know about Christ. In other words, the person and work of Christ (the gospel) is the test.

Listen to a few real quotes from teachers claiming to speak from God. "IF you deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, THEN is his grace sufficient for you." It uses biblical language, but does it pass the Gospel Test?

This is a quote from The Book of Mormon, which, at its heart, denies the gospel because it is not a gospel of grace, it is a "gospel" of works. You only get God's grace AFTER you rid yourself of all sin and love God with all your heart...WHICH IS NOT GRACE! Grace, by definition, is free, not earned. It is free to you because it cost Jesus his life! A life he gave up for you because he had a body that could die!

Consider another quote: "If any one denies, that, in the sacrament of the most holy Eucharist [Lord's Supper], are contained truly, really, and substantially, the body and blood...

of our Lord Jesus Christ,...but say that He is only there as in a sign,...let him be anathema.”

In other words, if you don't believe that Jesus' literal body and blood are in the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, you're cursed. This quote is from the Council of Trent of the Catholic Church. It is a denial of the gospel because Jesus HAS COME in flesh—once to die. He does not die in millions of churches around the world every week when they take the Lord's Supper.

He died once for all. It was finished. It was done. The Lord's Supper is not a perpetual re-crucifixion of Jesus. You're not coming each week to have your sins paid for again. You're coming to celebrate they already *were* paid for at cross! It's done!

So ask yourself: Does it pass the gospel test? Here's how we can summarize the **[Gospel]**. Any teaching that distorts, bends, adds to, or contradicts the gospel is not from the Spirit of God because the Spirit of God points people to Jesus Christ, the centerpiece of the gospel.

That's why John goes onto say in **[3b]**. "This"—any teaching that distorts the gospel (and specifically in his day, that says Jesus didn't come in the flesh)—is "of the antichrist." Which makes sense...because the gospel is all about the *true* Christ, and therefore, any teaching that distorts it, is ANTI-Christ.

Therefore, it is the same kind of teaching the antichrist—that guy whom the Bible says will come at the end of the age to pose as the Christ (Savior), but to lead many astray. John said in ch2, "many antichrists have already come," meaning, "There's a whole bunch of people out there teaching a false gospel. Don't believe them! Test them according to the trust gospel."

2) The Biblical Test

In vv4-6, John contrast/comparates four groups of people. The first group is true Christians. **[v4a, "YOU are from God."]** Meaning, "You've been born of God; you have new life in him." Why is he telling them that? We get a hint from **[v4b, "overcome them"]** That's the second group—"them." Who's that?

It's the many false prophets of v1 who are all over the world. True Christians have *overcome* these false prophets, which means, "You've not *listened* to them! You've not been led astray by their false teaching!" Back in ch2, John describes a group of people who were in the church, but left the church because they were led astray by these false teachers.

And he's saying here, "That hasn't happened to you. Have overcome them!" Why? What's the difference between true Christians and those who end being led astray by false teaching? **[v4c, "greater is he"]** Who's in the world? He said it in v3—the spirit of the antichrist. Who is the spirit of the antichrist? The devil!...

...whom the apostle Peter describes as "prowling around like roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Do you know how does he does that? He doesn't say to people, "I'm the devil. And the teaching you're hearing is from me, the devil." No! He wants you to think you're hearing from God, as 2 Corinthians 11:14 says, "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."

He does this through lies, like false teaching, to make you think it's from God. He's has a blinding hold on millions upon millions of people in this world! His power in the world is staggering and devastating.

BUT...he who is *in you* is greater than he who is in the world. Who's in you? The Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Truth...is infinitely greater than the devil. How do you know? Because you haven't gotten sucked away by false teaching. The HS keep you clinging to truth.

But that's not true for those who in the world, where the devil is. **[v5a-b]**. "These false teachers are from the world, where the spirit of the antichrist (namely, the devil), resides; and therefore, their teaching is worldly." So guess who listens? **[v5c]** Worldly people are attracted to worldly teaching.

This is a vital test of whether a teaching you hear is truly from God or not: Is it worldly? Does it appeal to the natural ears of those who are dead in their trespasses and sins?

Oh Kinney, beware of a message claiming to be from God that only appeals to the natural ears of the world. One person said, “False teachers will commonly gain a great following because they tell the world what the world wants to hear.” (ESV, 453)

I saw a post not long ago from a “pastor” in Austin who has openly rejected the Christian teaching of gender/marriage, and preaches, what he thinks, is the “way of Jesus.”

He said, “We were told that practicing radical inclusion would kill our church...That preaching the Way of Jesus every week would turn people away. [Our church] is living proof those are lies.” And he showed a picture of a packed-out room where they meet.

That shouldn't surprise us. The world listens to worldly teaching. One of the signs of a true Christian is the acceptance of the parts of the Bible that the natural ears of the non-Christian don't like.

Maybe you're not yet a Christian... we're so glad you're here! You might hear things from this pulpit that make you go, "Ew! I don't like that." We've had people attend this church who stop coming because of things that are said in this pulpit. And I seek to do my very best not to say anything that isn't found here [Bible]. That's why we preach straight from the Bible. But not every person who has attended a service likes what is here [Bible].

If that's true for you, can I reason with you? If there is a God who has spoken through this written Word, then when your response to his Word is, "Ew," you are standing in judgment over God. We're talking about God! The Creator of all things, who created you! Doesn't he have the right to say how you should live? Shouldn't we listen to him?

That's John's point in this passage. Those who are from God listen to godly teaching, driven by the Spirit of God who is in them. Those who are from the world listen to worldly teaching, driven by the spirit of the antichrist who is in the world. Therefore, Christian, listen to God!

How? That's where John lands. **[v6]** That is a staggering claim! "We, the 12 men whom Jesus commissioned to spread the gospel, are from God and if anyone does not listen to *us*, they're not from *God*." What a claim! How can he make that claim?

He can make that claim because God incarnate—Jesus Christ—commissioned them to declare his words to the world. Therefore, whoever rejects their words, rejects Jesus. And whomever rejects Jesus, rejects God.

The teaching of the apostles is the test of truth. Where do we access their teaching? Right here [in the Bible]! The NT is the teaching of the apostles, and therefore, any teaching that doesn't pass this test, should not be listened to! It really is enough for us to hear from God. Sometimes I wonder if we minimize the glory of what we have at our fingertips.

I remember reading an article from a well-known pastor/author who was known for his absolute commitment to the Bible. That's why the title of the article surprised me.

It was called, “The Morning I heard the Voice of God.” Here’s what he said: *Let me tell you about a most wonderful experience I had early Monday morning...a little after six o’clock. God actually spoke to me. There is no doubt that it was God. I heard the words in my head just as clearly as when a memory of a conversation passes across your consciousness. The words were in English, but they had about them an absolutely self-authenticating ring of truth. I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God still speaks today.*

I couldn’t sleep for some reason...In his mercy, God moved me out of bed. It was mostly dark, but I managed to find my clothing, got dressed, grabbed my briefcase, and slipped out of the room without waking up [my wife]...I sat down on a couch in the corner to pray...At this very place in the twenty-first century... God was speaking to me with absolute authority and self-evidencing reality.

Now, when some hear this, they get really intrigued and even thrilled! “Whoa, you heard God speak? That’s amazing. I wanna be able to

hear God speak? What did he say to you??"
The article continues...*He said, as clearly as any words have ever come into my mind, "I am awesome in my deeds toward the children of man."...[Then] he spoke again: "I keep watch over the nations."*

Do you know where those words come from? Psalm 66. Do you realize what this guy is saying? He continues: *It was through the Bible that I heard these divine words and through the Bible I have experiences like this almost every day. The very God of the universe speaks on every page into my mind—and your mind. We hear his very words. No voice anywhere anytime can reach as deep or lift as high or carry as far as the voice of God that we hear in the Bible...*

Now, some of us might feel disappointment by that. "God spoke to him through the Bible? Big deal. I thought he literally heard God's voice outside of the Bible. Big whoop. I got like five copies of the Bible at my house. I want something more."

The author of the article has a word to say about that: *Something is incredibly wrong when the words we hear outside Scripture are more powerful and more affecting to us than the inspired word of God* (<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-morning-i-heard-the-voice-of-god>)

Christian, don't minimize the Bible! It really is God speaking to us. And it is the lens through which you determine truth. So you gotta know your Bible. Don't skip Bible reading. Don't rush through it. And don't try to understand it all alone. Get equipped. Come to Sunday School. Get into a D-group. Don't miss church.

Conclusion

Kinney, don't believe gullible. Be loving but be wise. Don't believe everything you hear. Test it according to the gospel and test it according to the Bible. And God will keep us because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.