



1 John 4:1-3 Testing the Holy Spirit

When we pick things up this morning, we remember that John has been telling us there are at least three marks of a true Christian. No matter what someone may say about their spiritual condition or 'journey,' you ought to find at least three pieces of evidence in their lives if they're truly born again: 1.) obedience to God's commands, 2.) love for their brothers and sisters in Christ, and 3.) the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

We've been considering that last one lately, seeing in Scripture what it means for God to dwell in us, and then last week we saw how we can have three negative reactions to the Holy Spirit. First, unbelievers can resist Him - when God comes to you and tries to get your attention and you keep ignoring Him or putting Him off you resist Him and there's no way for Him to save you.

But even if you stop resisting Him and receive salvation, as a Christian your behavior can grieve the Holy Spirit. And we said you know the things you do that grieve God, you get a prick in your spirit that says, "mmmm... maybe I shouldn't do this," but you decide to do it anyway. That's grieving the Holy Spirit.

But then we also said you can quench the Holy Spirit. If we *grieve* the Spirit by doing things we shouldn't do; we *quench* the Spirit when we don't do things that we should - He's opening a door for us, He's prompting us, He's showing us some good thing that should be done and we say, "Mmmmm....not now Lord" or "Not yet Lord" or "Not me Lord." That's quenching the Spirit.

So, instead of resisting God, we need to submit. Instead of grieving God, we need to obey and walk in purity and righteousness, and instead of quenching God we need to have faith that He is calling us and equipping us for everything He brings our way.

But that brings up an important question - how do we know that it's really the Holy Spirit we're hearing, sensing, experiencing, what ever you want to call it? There seems to be no limit to the kind of behaviors and activities that people will attribute to 'the Holy Spirit.' You get people rolling around on the floor, or 'blessing' people with handkerchiefs, or even barking like dogs and they say, "Well, it was the Holy Spirit. Praise God."

And that wackiness has left some people wanting nothing to do with the Spirit - they prefer a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Bible - things you can 'trust.' They don't need any of that crazy 'Spirit' stuff - they'll get by with the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount and that's quite enough, thank you.

So which side is right? Should we be open to every kind of strange experience just because someone says 'the Spirit' led them? Or should we just ignore the Holy Spirit, and say, "well,

He did all that stuff back in the book of Acts and with the Apostles, but then it all kind of dried up and God doesn't do miraculous stuff any more – you know, that was then, this is now?"

Well, as is often the case, the answer isn't found at either extreme. We're not to reject the work of the Holy Spirit today, that would quench Him, and we've got a clear Biblical command not to do that (1 Thes 5:19). But neither should we just accept anything voice that comes along and claims to speak for God. We need to be spiritually discerning. And this morning, John has some important information that will help us determine what is, and what is not, of the Holy Spirit. Read with me:

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. **2** By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, **3** and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

John is very concerned with giving us boundaries. He told us to love our brothers and sisters in Christ back in Chapter 2 (2:7-11), but then he told us *not* to love the world or the things of the world a few verses later (2:15). Well, now he's told us that God has given us His Spirit (3:24), and then immediately after that, we're told *not* to believe every spirit (4:1). Christians are called to believe and to love, but always with understanding, never blindly.

So let's break this instruction down, and see what God wants us to know, starting with verse one:

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

The first thing we have to understand, right off the bat is: there is such a thing as false prophets. Not every spirit is from God. The Bible says there are two sides – there are spirits, ideas, and prophets that don't come from God.

And did you notice John isn't warning us against just one spirit or idea or teacher – he says there are “many” false prophets that have gone out. You get the sense that there's a spiritual minefield in this world and you need to be careful where you walk, and that's true. You do need to be careful about who you listen to, what you watch, and what you believe. You need to be spiritually discriminating.

But wait, isn't that a bad word: to discriminate?

Well, if we're talking about how *people* should be treated, yes, it's a bad word. This is Black History month and we need to remember that people have been discriminated against for stupid, selfish reasons by other human beings who were just hungry for power and pride

and used their situation to take advantage of other human beings, treating them as less than human beings. That's wrong, it's evil, it is not of God.

But what's not wrong, what's not evil, what is of God, is to discriminate between ideas and the spirit behind them – to say that the idea that we should treat all men equally and fairly is right and to discriminate against the idea that one man should ever own another simply on the basis of the color of his skin, well, that kind of discrimination is good, right, and necessary. Ideas, teachings, laws, spirits and their prophets should be judged, should be weighed, because they can take us down terrible roads, and lead us to locations that are horrendously desolate spiritually.

So we must discriminate spiritually, we must test the spirits, test the prophets, test the people we're listening to and critically consider: where is all of this leading me? **"Because many false prophets have gone out into the world."**

"But wait," you say, "I'm not still not sure about this whole being judgmental thing. Isn't there a verse in the Bible that says not to judge lest you be judged yourself?" Yes, there is. And it was even Jesus who said it. It's from the Sermon on the Mount and you can find it in Matthew 7:1. But if you keep going all the way down to verse 15 you find Jesus saying something else, He says:

Matt 7:15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits."

It turns out the act of evaluating something isn't wrong all by itself, it's only wrong if you're judging by a standard you won't apply to yourself. So don't judge others unless you're willing to be judged yourself. BUT, you should be willing. In fact, the Bible tells us to examine ourselves, to test ourselves, first:

2 Cor 13:5 Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified.

And then, as we examine ourselves, we are also able to examine others, using the same standards that God applies to all of us.

But here's something you need to know: testing, judging, discriminating – it's going to be hard and uncomfortable at times, because spirits most often speak through people: friends, teachers, neighbors, celebrities – and you might really like the person, but that doesn't mean they're telling you the Truth. False teachers, false prophets, dangerous spirits don't always look bad. That's why Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of false prophets who will come to you as wolves in sheep's clothing."

The fact that people are nice doesn't mean they're right. The fact that people are fervent doesn't mean they're right: excitement is not a proof of the truth; energy is not a proof of the truth; assurance and confidence are not proof of the truth.

And perhaps most important of all - the fact that I like what they say isn't proof of the truth – I don't trust my tongue to tell me what's good for me nutritionally. My mouth likes all kinds of things that are bad for me either in quantity or frequency. Don't expect to be instantly turned off by what a false spirit says. Instead, you should expect them to say some things that sound good, that sound right, that sound logical, but then to draw a wrong conclusion or suggest a wrong solution. And so we need a way to judge the truth.

I need a way to judge, and so do you, because according to our text, it's up to you. You high school sophomores and you high school teachers, it's up to you. You lawyers, it's up to you. You business owners, you office workers, it's up to you. John addresses his comments to the “Beloved” the *agapetos* – that's all of us who have put our faith in Christ. Testing the spirits isn't just a job for the theologians, the seminary and Bible college professors, the pastors or the ministry leaders; it's a job for all of us.

Dad you need to test the spirits that are speaking to your kids through their devices. Mom, you need to test the spirit that's speaking to you through that book you picked up. Young adult, you need to test the spirit of what your friend is sharing with you.

“But,” you say, “How am I supposed to make that judgment? How am I supposed to know what's true spiritually speaking? I've never read a book on theology, I have a hard enough time just trying to read *My Daily Bread* a few times each week.”

Well, I get what you're saying – though I do think you can do better than just reading *My Daily Bread* a few times each week – if you want ideas, just contact me. But I understand, we live in a world where we have so much access to information that it's hard to know what's true, what's current, what's real and therefore, it's hard to make good judgments.

Last year there was an article titled “The Agency”¹ in the New York Times Magazine, there's a link to it in the sermon notes. It wasn't about our little agency up in Mclean; it was about a Russian group that was creating false news stories in America. They created fake videos of a fire at a chemical plant in Louisiana, posted them to YouTube, created fake CNN reports of the event, and then started using Twitter and Facebook posts from fake accounts that started reporting on the event. So, the local authorities and others are getting real texts, real Tweets, real alerts from social media, with a link to the You Tube video showing it all happening, screen shots of the CNN reporting, and people in Saint Mary Parish are starting to panic about a disaster at a chemical plant that never happened.

Our technology is so good these days, and so widely available that's it's not terribly difficult to pull off a massive hoax, and it's one thing to pull off a practical joke, but you know that's not the goal of all this. People want to create fear, they want to create chaos, or they want to control and manipulate you. People want it to be difficult to know the truth.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html?_r=0

I don't have all the answers for how to defend yourself against manufactured events trending in social media – that's up to smart people like some of you who work in IT, intel, government and law enforcement to figure out – but I can tell you how to defend yourself against the same kind of manipulation spiritually, and it involves testing the spirits. Just like you want to investigate who is reporting what, and from what angle, when you see something online, you want to evaluate who is reporting what spiritually, so John tells us “test the spirits.”

Scrutinize them, examine them, see if they're genuine or not, and either approve of them - deem them genuine and worthy of receiving, or reject them as false and harmful.

OK, but how? How am I supposed to test a spirit? How am I supposed to know if something is right or wrong spiritually? Well, I've got good news for you – John has given us the key.

Did one of your teachers ever ask you to grade tests for them? If so, you might remember them handing you the answer key as well. Or maybe you were one of those kids who found the key before the test and tried to memorize the answers? Well the point is: if you have the key, you know how to grade – you know how to judge, you know what's right or wrong, what's true or false. And here in Chapter Four John says, “here's the key” to a very important test:

1 John 4:2 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

So, when you're judging spirits, when you're judging prophets, when you're judging spiritual teaching – whether it's in a book or magazine, or a podcast, or from the pulpit, or from a daytime TV show host, or anywhere else you might come across it, the key is: Do they confess Jesus Christ come in the flesh? Do they make a big deal about Him?

Let me give you three specific things to watch out for when you're evaluating things spiritually.

First, beware of men and ministries that promote the Holy Spirit over Christ. They have things backwards. The Holy Spirit didn't come to make a big deal of Himself. Watch out for things that are little more than a spiritual circus, where it's all about what you experience as if church or prayer meeting is like going to a spiritual amusement park where you're supposed to get wowed and awed with goosebumps if all goes right. If you're wowed and awed and moved to tears of joy or tears of sorrow by the preaching of the truth, that's awesome, but don't go to church expecting the experience as if the 'feeling' is the main reason you're there. God should be the main reason you're there, regardless of what you 'feel.'

Second, beware of men and ministries that put you at the center of things instead of Jesus.

There's a lot that goes on in the name of 'church' and 'spirituality' that doesn't make a big deal about Jesus. Instead, they're concerned with helping you overcome your problems, or find your best life now. They promise to help you get all the stuff you've always wanted by shopping at Jesus. He'll help you win your game, He'll help you get a job, He'll help you buy that car, whatever your heart desires, Jesus will help you get it, as if you're the center of it all and now you've got your little Jesus genie and He's going to answer all your prayers.

That's all wrong, it's completely out of focus. If what you're hearing is from the Holy Spirit, it will make a big deal out of Jesus, not you – just like John the Baptist said, I must decrease, He must increase.

And number three: beware of men and ministries that promote themselves instead of Christ.

We have to be really careful about this as a church. I remember back in Southern California during the late 90's and early 2000's there was a real estate boom going on – the development of what we would eventually realize was the Real Estate Bubble once it collapsed. Madeleine and I watched thousands and thousands of home being built all around us – hills would be wiped out by an army of earth movers and then the concrete would be poured and the lumber nailed together and the next thing you knew the sod was being laid and the cars were moving in.

And along with all the housing came new churches – and new churches tend to be trendy churches, they can't help it, they're new, so they don't have any tradition to shape them. But they're all 'competing' for lack of a better word, with the other new churches and old churches for all these new people and you would see signs and bumper stickers and all kinds of branding for 'my cool church.' And it's hard to judge the motive of people, you want to be super careful about that – but it just gave the impression that what they were really trying to do is build up their 'brand' more than the name of Christ. And that's dangerous.

Friends, we're a good church. I'm glad you're here with us, I hope you'll stay with us. I know some of you are still trying to figure out whether you like or how much you hate the changes we've been through lately, but this is a good church, with good, growing people and we're trying to make much of Jesus and the Bible, but we're not the only church. We want to confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, and we want to exalt His name, but we know others are trying to do that too – and we're thankful for them, we're not in competition with them. Hopefully they're doing some things better than we can do, or they're doing some things we can't do, and hopefully the same is true with us – that among the God-honoring, Christ-exalting, Spirit-led churches in our area, we're covering each other's blindspots to the glory of God and the benefit of our community.

But watch out for churches or groups or ministries that want to pull you into their brand, or their special doctrine, or their special book. That's the primary sociological identifier of a cult – that they think they're the best way and they're better than other groups.

If you're looking for a church, or a book, or a podcast, or a video, or whatever you're looking for – ask yourself, do they make much of Jesus Christ, come in the flesh? If not, pass them by.

On the night before Jesus died, in the Upper Room, He gave a last minute briefing to His disciples and He told them:

John 15: 26 “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. 27 And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.

There are many other things the Holy Spirit does, but this one is primary and foundational – He makes much of Jesus. He testifies to us about Christ, about Jesus Christ, come in the flesh.

But why is that so important? It's because the phrase “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” is a quick summary of the true identity of our Savior and it helps you understand all that God has done for you.

“Jesus Christ come in the flesh” reminds us that He was a real person in real life – you could have touched Him, plenty of people did – you could have eaten dinner with Him – plenty of people did. He was a historical figure as real as Caesar, or Genghis Khan, George Washington, or Shihuangdi (秦始皇). He was here, and He was real.

All of His teaching could have been accomplished by angels or prophets, all of His miracles could have been worked by men through the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, after His resurrection, both Paul and Peter were enabled to raise men from the dead, just as Jesus had done. God can, has, and does work miracles through ordinary men and women.

But no man or angel could die for us as a sacrifice for our sins. Remember, this is Jesus, that's His name, Christ, that's His title and that title means He was the promised one of God who would be a sacrifice for the sins of men. You can't do that unless you have flesh. What good is a spiritual death on the cross? No, Calvary required a holy God and human flesh – joined together is a magnificently mysterious way in Jesus Christ, son of Mary, born in Bethlehem.

He is why we're here this morning. The Holy Spirit has led us here, the Holy Spirit has called us here, the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in those of you that are saved, He's enabling people all over this building to serve right now, but it's not for His own sake, it's not for your sake individually, and it's not to make the name of our church great – it's for the glory of God who sent His Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. To pull us out of the jaws of hell and grant us the gift of a new life in Christ.

We're going to celebrate that now, we're going to join the Holy Spirit in making a big deal about Jesus by receiving communion – a physical, tangible, reminder of what God has done for us.

But as we prepare to do so, we need to be a little judgmental – we need to examine ourselves. Listen to what the Apostle Paul told the church in Corinth:

1 Cor 11: 23 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the *same* night in which He was betrayed took bread; 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke *it* and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 25 In the same manner *He* also *took* the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me."
26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.
27 Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks *this* cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

As the ushers are passing out the elements this morning, I want to encourage you to take a moment and consider: are you receiving this in a worthy manner?

Examine your self, judge your self, discriminate against your self – see the truth about who you are and where you are spiritually, and then ask – what about Christ? How does He relate to all of this that I see in me?

If He has saved you, if you have found forgiveness in Him, if He is your only hope for salvation, then you are worthy to receive this reminder of His life, death, suffering and sacrifice. But if you have resisted the Holy Spirit and His calling you to salvation, then you need to let the plate pass you by.

If you received Him though, then you need to receive the elements as well.

And while you're waiting on them, or while you're holding them, examine yourself. Remember what this is all about – forgiveness of sin. Is there any sin in your life today that you need to talk with God about? And how about your focus? Are you seeking Jesus, or is your religion about your own experience and the things you want? Have you allowed any false spirits to influence you and the things you value? Take this time and work these things out between you and God. He's giving us this instruction this morning for a reason, let's not miss out on what He's saying.

Let's pray.