

1 John 4:1-6 *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. 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. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. 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. 5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. 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.*

## Confidence – 09 Discernment

John deeply cares for the church he is writing to. He is looking to bring a heart level clarity, that he might share together in the joy of their confidence in Christ. He is not seeking to merely arm them with the truth but to fortify them against deception. John is cultivating our discernment. Who do we trust? What counsel do we adhere to? Who do we look to for proper interpretation? John provides us with tests for ourselves that will strengthen the gullible and humble the skeptical, that we might discern what is from the Spirit of God and what is from the spirit of the world. John provides us two lenses that we can look through to test what we are hearing, the lens of Christ, and the lens of scripture.

This concept is so personal that I don't think I can preach this without speaking at least somewhat in first person. There are few things that stress me out more than hearing friends get seduced by bad teaching. When I reflect on my faith over the years, my story is littered with bad teaching, I thought was good. It's kind of terrifying to be honest because I intend to continue growing in my faith, and I'm up here talking to you, so what does that mean when I follow someone down a road that was not the spirit of God but the spirit of the world, and then I stand up and preach it?

When I first became a Christian, when I was fifteen, I just started reading. The Bible a little, but Christian books a lot. I'd wander through Barnes & Noble cobbling together a pop Christian education, unsupervised. Rob Bell was a young megachurch pastor at the time, and I devoured his stuff. He had books called things like *Velvet Elvis*, probably read 10 times. *Jesus wants to Save Christians*, a book which fit snugly into my high school Ron Paul libertarian phase, *Sex God*, a book which fit snugly into my high school desire to be having sex. His books shaped my method of interpretation as he would say things like;

*"If the gospel isn't good news for everybody, then it isn't good news for anybody."*

That phrase is so nice to say, I didn't have the capacity to test its accuracy. But look what he did, like a magic trick he put me outside of the Bible. I now had a moral phrase by which I could judge scripture, it was no longer the other way around. Of course at first this felt only liberating, unfortunately it later became only confining. When I became the moral arbiter over scripture, scripture was no longer something I could lean into for comfort. I could play with it, wriggle out of sticky philosophical problems with it, but I couldn't trust it.

My senior year of high school when my family went through a hard time, and my future became uncertain for the first time, the faith I had to fall back on had become so thin, it just couldn't support the weight. I remember sitting on the couch talking to my mom saying I just didn't know what I believed anymore. I had great questions, refined and polished doubts, and a baseline understanding that the truth of the matter was ultimately to be found in me. Who cares what I think?

I care so much about our ability as a church to do this, because when we drift and lose sight of these key principles that John will show us, we lose our comfort, our confidence, our hope. A faith that once was like a salve to a wounded heart no longer helps. Our prayers become hopeless musings, and we're lost at sea again. John's tests perfectly guard us. It is not enough to know the truth, we must also be guarded against falsehood. He provides a warning and two deeply practical tests.

## 1. The Warning

*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.*

Christianity is not something to be indiscriminately trusted. Not all things that call themselves Christian are, and the ability to discover the truth of the matter is key to maintaining or discovering your faith. A lot of you grew up with a conception of Christianity that talked about faith and doubt only in terms of weakness and strength, or courage and cowardice. These are components, especially in making our faith become actionable, however a more baseline component is, at least initially, accuracy.

The three spiritual virtues of faith, hope and love are not general values diffused throughout creation, but they are particular events with objects that they are directed towards. You don't just love, you love someone. You don't just hope, you hope something will happen. You don't just have faith, you have faith *in* something. It is the objects of these virtues that determine their ultimate value, and your discerning of the proper object determines the value of the

virtue. You must believe accurately, it is a true faith that rescues us and guides us and develops courage and strength. You can have the most courageous faith you want, but if it is in the wrong thing you will be put to shame. The quantity discussion can only take place after the quality has been established.

That might sound confining, but it's better than that. If you grew up in a religious space that denied questioning, or denied cultivating your own ability to discern truth from falsehood, and rather asked you to trust them, and spoke of your faith's health in terms of your submission to their values, then you should feel liberated. There is no Christian, no matter how humble in the faith who does not possess what the reformers called, "the right of private judgement." You must cultivate this as a Christian.

We often think that the cynical are not easily tricked and the credulous are easily tricked. However the lines do not fall so clearly for discerning good Christian teaching. This is not a test of personality or demeanor. The reason is that a cynic, is not just disbelieving in Christianity. But they are likewise believing in some other worldview. I would have called it cynicism that drove me to enjoy the false teaching that I have reveled in. However in reflection, I can see that it was actually my credulity with regard to our normal cultural values. There is always a credulousness buried within a cynicism. The tests that John provides are meant to tease those out. First the test of Jesus.

## 2. The Jesus Test

*1 John 4:2-3 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,<sup>3</sup> 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.*

There is no attestation to Christianity without the centrality of Jesus. Well this just seems circular you may think. How can it be that in order to test the truth or falsehood of someone's claims about Christianity, I must immediately adhere to the most central tenant? Well John is not talking about Jesus generally but two specific and defining attributes of Jesus. The two things that John holds together in this phrase, it is that Jesus is (1) the Christ, and (2) he has come in the flesh. From the very beginning it has been the holding of these two things together that has distinguished true faith from falsehood and it is our ability to hold them together that provides us the ground for our discernment.

(1) Saying Jesus is the Christ is the claim to his divine identity as the King who has come into the world, the Son of God with the right to the throne, who can righteously lead the redemption of all creation. (2) To say he came in the flesh is to acknowledge that while completely God he is also completely human. It is a paradox, don't try and reconcile it. Jesus being fully man means that he was truly physical, lived and died, and his death could serve as a representative for humanity in the same way that Adam's sin represented humanity. The whole Gospel is built into these two principles. It is not Jesus generally, but this clear fact about him in scripture on which all the hope of the gospel hangs. That he is fully God, and fully man. It is in these principles that the good news becomes good, because it is this that allows him to fully redeem humans.

The church John wrote to was facing particular attack from Gnostics. These denied that Jesus came in the flesh. Seeking to reconcile Christianity with the dominant Greek thinking which viewed the physical world as an illusion to be transcended. I've talked about this a bit before, but I think it is appropriate to hit on it again here. You will hear it said that the point of Jesus is not that he was a real person who walked and breathed and took place in history, but rather it is the archetypal or legendary nature of the gospel. Was Jesus the Christ? Sure. Physical human? No.

We don't encounter Gnosticism so much as we encounter allegory and archetype. What is the Christ, but a concept built deep into our biology, that we express in terms of stories that we pass down from generation to generation? It is not saying that Jesus didn't exist, but that his physical existence is not really what matters in our understanding of him. What really matters is getting the archetype right that we relate to. Then when we get the archetype right we are able to express the heights of our biology as constrained within the limits of the world.

Remember the move that I showed you Rob Bell made in his quote earlier? Don't you see, this at its root is the same. No longer am I approaching Jesus as an externality that I must reckon with, but rather as an internal reality with my intuition as its focal point.

When John calls you to test whether or not the teaching you are receiving is based upon the reality of Christ come in the flesh, he is making it impossible to base your faith on you. This is almost always the case with every false teaching, is that it ultimately finds its basis its root, in you the individual or in humans generally and not in the reality or who God is and what he has done in Christ. Rather than a faith that views you as a creature and God as God. The Gospel is a story that happens to you, and because it is outside of you it is something that you take comfort in and respond to and are saved by. This is the critical

component of Christianity that the story is not centered around us, but around Christ, the Spirit always testifies to Christ. If we get Christ wrong, we'll be misinterpreting the spirit all over the place, and immediately affirming anyone who uses the idea of Jesus for any purpose that feels positive to us.

### 3. The Scripture Test

*1 John 4:5-6 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup> 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.*

God has not left us without guidance, but rather we have the ability to test the spirits of our teaching by the scripture. If you remember back to our very first sermon in this series, you can see how John uses the term "we." John is referring to himself and the other apostles. Those early witnesses of Christ who have received a particular anointing from the Holy Spirit to relay to us the scriptures. Their teaching which we have in these letters in the Bible is the very word of God. This could not be claimed by just any Christian teacher. It would be the absolute height of manipulation for me to say, look you can tell it's the word of God because I'm saying it and people listen to me when I say it. But John is not speaking on behalf of himself but his office and commission as an apostle. This is therefore the next test that John provides us to test what we are hearing that is its conformity to scripture.

Likewise John gives us this sociological component to see the truth. You can begin to sense the falsehood of a teaching by the way the world agrees with it. Tim Keller defines the "world" as a stand in for what we would now call secularism. Secularism is not necessarily a denial of God, although that is how we use the word colloquially, rather it is a complete emphasis on now. A secular worldview doesn't require God in any way, it rather allows us to explain all of creation apart from God.

The Biblical description of reality means that Christ is not a component piece but is essential to the way that we view everything. This is the difference between the way that the world sees and agrees with Christ and the way that the Spirit of God shows us the truth of Christ. Paul says it like this,

*Colossians 1:15-20 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is*

*before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. <sup>19</sup>For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup>and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

If you can explain the world without Christ as its most fundamental component. If you can explain meaning without the comprehensive nature of Christ. If your morality doesn't require Jesus to have come back from the dead. Then we're just talking about different stories. The difference isn't between cynical and gullible, courageous or cowardice, lots of faith or a little faith, the test of the Spirits comes down to seeing Jesus as he is in the bible.