

## Testing the Spirits

*1 John 4:1-6 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. <sup>2</sup> By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. <sup>5</sup> They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. <sup>6</sup> We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*

When individuals are newly saved, and they begin to grow in their knowledge of the Christian life, one of the first things which begins to unsettle them is all the disagreements among Christians over doctrine. And soon, they begin to ask questions like, “Why are there so many types of church? Why are there so many denominations?” And it's a good question. In fact, not many people know quite how many denominations there really are. They are usually able to identify some of the well known ones: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, as well as some of the cults – Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Science. But in fact, the differences are much bigger than that. According to the World Christian Encyclopedia (year 2000 version), global Christianity had 33,820 denominations. I can't even begin to picture that number in my head.

Why are there so many differences? Part of the answer is that good Christians are going to come to different conclusions where Scripture is a bit unclear. But another part of the answer is what John tells us in this passage. John tells us that many false prophets have gone out into the world and 33 000 denominations are living proof of that. Many false prophets have gone out into the world. The threat of deception and division is greater than ever before. The truth and its true messengers are now mixed in with false teachers with a false message. Not everyone who claims to speak for God, or claims to be from God must be believed or trusted. So God's people have to respond to this situation. Just like you respond to the crime rate with various precautions, so Christians must respond to this proliferation of false teachers in a particular way. You've got to have some way of navigating through all this confusion.

In this passage John tells us part of the way true Christians recognise error and truth. He does so by telling us what not to do, and what we must do. We are told to not believe every spirit, and we are told to test every spirit. So we'll consider those two under two headings: 1 – Don't Be Gullible, 2, Instead, Be Discriminating.

### I. Don't Be Gullible

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit*

John says, do not believe every spirit. By spirit, he simply means person - a person who talks to you. And he says, "Do not believe every person who talks to you". A person who believes everything he hears or read is gullible. You might not be gullible in every area, but the fact that God calls us sheep means we are all gullible in some areas. We put up our guard against certain people, and test them very carefully, and others, we open the door and believe all they say. How do we avoid being gullible? Proverbs 18 gives us two very important principles for avoiding gullibility.

*Harden yourself against gossip (18:8)*

In what way is gossip and false teaching related? Well, both gossip and false teaching are usually

truths combined with lies. Both gossip and false teaching are destructive in the end. Both gossip and false teaching divide churches. And if you are willing to accept gossip, you will probably be the kind of person who will accept false teaching. Because if you are willing to listen to someone destroy another person's reputation, you might become the kind of person who is willing to listen to a person destroy God's reputation.

How do I know it's gossip? It is really very simple. If what is being said would cause the person being talked about to want to be there to defend himself or herself, it's gossip. If the topic of conversation is another person, or his or her situation, and what you say is something where he or she would want to answer for himself or herself, it's gossip. Whether the person says something obviously destructive, or whether it is subtle innuendo, or diminishment, or supposed constructive criticism.

*James 4:11 Do not speak evil of one another, brethren.*

And Christians need to harden themselves to this kind of thing. And when I say harden, I don't mean become hard towards people. I mean, become hard towards allowing gossip into a conversation. See, this is where we fall down. We think because someone is coming to us for counsel, because they are asking for advice, because they are pouring out their sorrows on us, that the rules of biblical communication change, and they are allowed to gossip, and we are allowed to listen to it. No. It doesn't matter if the person you are talking to is 10, 20, 40 or 60 years old. It doesn't matter if the person is male or female, single or married or divorced or widowed, black or white, learned or uneducated – no one is allowed to gossip. And you are no one's saviour or helper or counsellor by listening to it.

We have a funny idea about false teachers and false brethren. I think sometimes we think that the wolf that divides and ravages the local church is going to walk in with a T-shirt saying 'wolf'. Or that he or she will have this kind of nasty, snarling demeanour that will alert us all – wolf! No, the wolf in the church has meals and coffee with you. He or she attends prayer meetings and expresses great spiritual desires. And guess what? Most wolves don't realise they are wolves. Most of them don't say, "I'm going to come in and tear this church apart." They often think they are helping and edifying the body. But because of pride, because of a self-willed attitude, because of a lack of open, humble communication, they end up being used by Satan to create great destruction.

Watch the pride in your heart. Pride says things like, because I am such a fair-minded, balanced and mature Christian, I can handle this person's slander. It won't affect me. It won't poison my mind, because I am so experienced, and am able to keep a neutral and objective attitude. If that were true, why do you think God would warn us against listening to the gossip? No one can handle the poison of gossip without it affecting them in some negative way.

It takes a special kind of Christian to stop someone in a conversation and say, "Now you know, what you're saying about so-and-so is the kind of thing where I'm sure they would want to be here to reply to what you have just said. So since they are not here, let's not talk about this anymore." It takes a special kind of Christian to say, "You know, you're saying something quite damaging about someone else who is not here to defend himself. That's not right, and we need to change tracks right now." It shouldn't be a special kind of Christian. It should just be the normal kind of Christian.

They say, "Well, I would say this to their face." So what? The fact that you are willing to damage another person's reputation in their presence doesn't make it acceptable to do it when they aren't there. There's not a shred more integrity in that.

And don't fall for the "What I'm about to say is not gossip" intro. "You know, I'm not trying to be critical, but..." "Now don't take this as being judgemental, but." "Now God bless so-and-so's heart, but..." "I've got nothing against so-and-so, but..." That's as good as having a gun, pointing it at someone and saying, "Now don't take this as violence but... BANG!"

You see, the reason we don't harden ourselves against is that gossip is like tasty morsels. It is a delicious, secretive feeling to it, like we are trying out new foods, sampling new information about someone. It warms our own egos, to think that this person sees me as a confidante, as a counsellor, as a person he or she can share sensitive details with. And as we diminish another person, criticise, minimise, spread innuendo, or otherwise soil his or her reputation, it has a wickedly uplifting feeling to our own pride.

Harden yourself against gossip. That kind of person will hear false teaching the same way. If you harden yourself against gossip, you will say to false teachers, "You know, you are saying something about Christian doctrine that thousands of teachers of the church would want to be here to defend. I might not have all the answers for you, but we don't need to discuss this any further."

*Suspend judgements when you do not have all the facts (18:13, 17).*

If you have passed judgement on a matter, without hearing all the facts, what does the Bible say is true of you? You are foolish and ought to be ashamed. When you pass sentence on a situation, decide about another person, take sides in a conflict when you do not know all the facts, or have not heard the other side, it is sinful.

No one is so mature, and so experienced and so knowledgeable that he is able to see into the hearts of everyone, and render a perfect judgement with only one side of a story, or only a certain set of facts. Verse 17 says the one who tells you his story first seems right, until his neighbour, the other person comes and gives his side of the story. No one is able to know the whole story by hearing one person tell you the other side.

You see, when pride enters our hearts, we think of ourselves as more mature, not less, as more discerning, not less, as more fair-minded, not less. And so we become content to pass more and more judgement with less and less facts. We become more and more certain and opinionated, while being less and less informed.

Avoid that. Become the kind of person who suspends judgements until all the facts are in. And in some situations, you will never get all the facts, and in those cases, you have to choose to not make a judgement at all. That's the problem with listening to gossip. When you listen to gossip, you are listening to someone poison your mind against someone else. And because the gossipier tells you first, he or she seems right. But the problem is this: the person that the gossipier has slandered may have so much integrity that he or she will never tell you his or her side, if it is none of your business. The sad result is, you've got a bunch of lies floating around in your mind, and no one is going to answer those lies because you should never have heard them in the first place. So now you have to settle in your mind that you are going to suspend judgement indefinitely, because you shouldn't have heard those things to begin with.

In the same way, when it comes to doctrine, you choose to suspend judgement on some matter of Christian doctrine that is challenged by a teacher until you are sure you have fully heard the matter. In an era of information explosion, we have to be all the more careful. Don't be swayed by reading one web page, or one pamphlet, or one sermon CD. Don't be swayed because someone gives you a book. That web page, sermon, or book may be true but you have to suspend judgement until you

have fully heard the matter. That would mean asking your spiritual leaders. It would mean consulting people who have given their lives to defending and articulating doctrine. It would mean hearing what commentators over the centuries have said on the matter. If you do not learn to wait before you judge, you will truly become one of those children that Paul describe in Ephesians 4:17 who are tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine.

So in both our dealings with individuals and with Christian doctrine, we avoid becoming gullible by hardening ourselves against gossip, and learning to suspend judgement until we have the necessary facts.

Don't believe every spirit, whether in the church or outside it. But then John tells us what we are supposed to do. He tells us

## **II. Instead, be Discriminating**

*But test the spirits, whether they are of God*

John tells us to test those who speak to us; test to see if they are of God. This word for 'test' means to examine, to find out what sort, or what type of thing something is by subjecting it to a test. And that's what John is saying. You can find out whether a person is from God or not. You can discriminate between true and false, God and Satan, Christ and the world by applying this test. That's encouraging. Twice John tells us that there is a test we can apply and it works.

*By this you know the Spirit of God (v2)*

*1 John 4:6 By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*

And not only does John assure us that there is a test and that it works, he assures us that these false teachers and false brethren are already defeated. The spirit that empowers them is not as great as the Spirit who indwells and empowers us.

*1 John 4:4 You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.*

You don't have to fear all this false teaching. You don't have to fear wolves that come into the local church. Your defeat of them is already certain, because you belong to Christ. God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind. You keep on trusting, loving, and applying a disciplined mind to every person, and God will protect and purify His church.

So what is the test which God wants us to apply to discriminate between true and false?

There are really two tests:

### **The test of their teaching.**

*By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, <sup>3</sup> 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 here speaks about a heresy which affected the early church – Docetism. The Docetists denied that Jesus had come to earth in an actual body. They taught he had merely had the appearance of a human, but was actually not human. And of course, if Jesus had not actually been born, and lived as

a human being like us, how could He be a substitute for any of us on the cross. Jesus Christ has to have been fully God to be holy and sinless, and yet fully man to be a true substitute and mediator for mankind.

So John says, if someone agrees that Jesus Christ – that is, Messiah Jesus, the Prophet-Priest-King Jesus, has come in human flesh, as a true human, that person is of God. That person is confessing truth through the Holy Spirit. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:

*“no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.*

However, the person who does not confess this, is not of God. And such a teacher who denies the true Person of Christ lives and teaches in the spirit of Antichrist. Antichrist was predicted, Antichrist is still coming, and in a smaller sense, Antichrist is here. Every form of denial of the gospel is the spirit of Antichrist. The gospel is man's only way of salvation. To pervert the gospel is to oppose all that Christ came to do.

Here John emphasises the full humanity of Jesus, because the earliest serious heresies were attacks on this. That's not the only catastrophic error. Any doctrine which is crucial to the gospel is what we call a fundamental doctrine. To deny any of the fundamentals is to deny the faith altogether. Denials of virgin birth, deity of Christ, Christ's sinless life, bodily resurrection and ascension and eventual return, the Trinity, the substitutionary atonement, salvation by grace alone through faith alone, man's depravity, eternal punishment, and the authority of Scripture, deny the faith

So, if you hear someone denying any one of the fundamental doctrines, you treat it like you would gossip. You say you know these doctrines have been settled by the church for two thousand years. I'm not going to allow you to slander the Lord or His church. The Scriptures are very clear on what the Gospel is, and they are not open for discussion.

When someone is not openly denying the gospel, but introducing confusing teachings, you suspend judgement. You can say to yourself, “I haven't heard the whole matter. I need to. I am going to gather a lot more information before I render a judgement.” I need to study the Scriptures more on this point. I need to ask my spiritual elders. I need to read what the church has said on this point.

Test their teaching, over the long-haul. If it denies Christ, if it denies the gospel, the person is not of God, regardless of how sweet or funny or handsome or winsome he or she may be.

We test them by their teaching.

The second test we use is found in verses 5 and 6

<sup>5</sup> *They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.* <sup>6</sup> *We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*

### **The test of their audience.**

John tells us that false teachers are of the world, that's their origin. And when they speak, they speak out of what they are.

*Matthew 7:15-18 Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.* <sup>16</sup> *"You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?"* <sup>17</sup> *"Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.* <sup>18</sup> *"A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.*

That means that their message is worldly. Since they are of the world, they speak from what they are and what comes out is worldliness. And when they keep speaking their worldliness, who do you think listens to them? The world, they speak of the world and the world hears them. So here is a key test. When this teacher speaks or writes, who is the audience? Who is he or she popular with?

That's why it is no compliment when a Christian teacher is adored by the mainstream media. It is not a good sign when unbelievers by the hundreds of thousands are buying your books, attending your meetings or loving your message. Because unless they are being converted by the hundreds of thousand, they will not love a pure gospel. They will not love a message which tells them to repent. They will not love a message which says there is only one way, it is Jesus Christ, to whom you must bow the knee, accept His Lordship over your life, trust Him completely, forsake your sin and receive His free gift. They will not like the message of judgement and hell because of sin. They will not like the message of repentance and following Jesus. But they will like a message which says God will give you what you want. They will like a message which says God will give them a wonderful life, give them money, heal their bodies, give them perfect families, indulge their pleasures, and basically support their every need and greed. That's a worldly message. They will like a message which says Christianity is one of many options. They like a message which says that it doesn't really matter what you believe or do, so long as you aren't the worst of the worst sinners. They like a message which says God will improve your life now and give you heaven no matter what.

Are there people preaching and teaching this today? Yes. How do their books sell? How big are their churches? How big is their TV viewership? In other words, the world hears them. The world listens to their message. What does that mean about them? They are of the world.

By contrast, John says something about himself and his fellow apostles. We are of God. The apostles were chosen by Jesus, and with the exception of Judas, they were all regenerated believers. When they spoke, they spoke from God. And when they wrote down what they heard from God, it became the New Testament.

So here is the modern application. Whoever hears and listens to the clear teaching of the apostles found in Scripture – is of God. So here is an interesting test:

Here is one man who tells you he is going to teach on, “The Secret of the Fantastic Life”

Here is another man who tells you he is going to teach on Romans 1:18-32. Which talk are you interested in going to? Oh, I know we might all be superficially interested to hear the talk on what makes life fantastic, but the real test is: who wants to sit down and hear a verse-by-verse exposition of what the apostle's taught? Who is really interested in hearing the message of the Bible explained in context? Answer: whoever is of God.

That's why God's people will endure a hard chair for 40 minutes to an hour to hear not a dialogue, but a monologue – a proclamation of God's Word – what it says. Why? Because they are of God. God's people are drawn to hear the words of God. The world is not interested in the words of God; it is interested in the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and pride of life.

This is a very simple test. What do they teach, and who listens to them? Do they teach a clear gospel, and are God's people listening? Or is it a muddy, unclear gospel, a worldly teaching that the world is interested in?

Discriminate by applying this test. And avoid being gullible by hardening yourself against loose,

slandorous talk, and by learning to suspend judgement until you have all the facts.

What area do you need to go to work on? Your openness to gossip. You need to learn to lovingly harden yourself against gossip, and protect the reputations of others, just as you would want yours protected. Perhaps it's the practice of suspending judgement until you have all the information. You need to apply that within the church and towards all people who claim to speak for Christ.

Maybe you need to work on applying this test. Consider the people you watch on TV, or listen to on radio, or buy from the book-store. Do they teach a sound, clear gospel? Who is their audience? Of course, if you are the audience of someone who is popular with the world, this ought to cause you to examine your own salvation. If you want to hear those who speak the Word of God, this is a good sign.