

“Test the Spirits,” 1 John 4:1-6 (Pentecost Sunday, May 20, 2018)

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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.

## PRAY

My prayer is for a church full of unbelievers. I want a church full of skeptics and doubters. Now I've never spoken those sentences before in church, but they are true ... in a sense. The apostle John warns Christians in 1 John 4:1 to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” In other words, John wants Christians to be able to evaluate every kind of spiritual or moral or biblical teaching they encounter and discern for themselves whether or not it is from God and, therefore the truth, or from a false prophet and therefore a lie.

Proverbs 18:15 (NIV 1984) says, “The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek it out.” John wants all Christians to be discerning, and so do I. Christians aren't exactly known for being discerning. I think our reputation in the world is that we are rather gullible. Unfortunately, my experience as a pastor has not done much to disprove that reputation.

But we can be. More than that, we must be discerning. I want our church to be full of people who have a healthy skepticism, who refuse to accept teaching just because it's fashionable or popular today or because someone somewhere slapped the label “Christian” on it. I want us to be able to test the spirits to see whether or not they are from God.

Two points: *first, why we should test the spirits.* *Second, how we can test the spirits.*

First, why we should test the spirits. Three reasons: *first and foremost, false teaching lies about God.* All through the Bible we are told that God is not pleased with false teachers because they lie about his character or his purposes in the world or his motives.

No one likes it when lies are spread about them. I would hope that if someone came up to you and started telling you lies about me, statements you knew were untrue and in some way defamed my character, you would love me enough to say or do something to stop it. You certainly should expect the same from me and everyone who knows you and loves you. Simply because we love the God revealed in the Bible we must test the spirits and refuse to give our time and attention to those who teach falsely about God and, when appropriate, confront them.

*Second, false teaching will make you sick.* Every year the water association where we live gets tested by the state of Mississippi to make sure the water in our neighborhood is safe drink, and every year there's some amount of lead in the water. Lead is highly toxic and lead poisoning can kill you.

However, I still drink gallons of water from the faucets in my house every week. Why? Because while there is lead in my water it's present only in trace amounts. The water in my house is contaminated (and probably yours is too – sorry), but the contamination is at such minute levels that it has no effect on the body.

Jesus in Matthew 4:4 says, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Jesus compares the truth that comes from God to food, and just as physical bread nourishes the body so God's word nourishes the soul.

Peter in 1 Peter compares God's Word to milk and he writes, “Like newborn infants, long for the *pure spiritual milk*, that by it you may grow up into salvation—<sup>3</sup> if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” 1 Peter 2:2-3.

And unlike the water at my house I can safely feed only on *absolutely pure* spiritual food – in other words, only teaching that accords completely and totally with God's Word can be safely digested by our souls.

All of us are hungry for love, for acceptance, for meaning and purpose in life. We are going to seek those things out. But we can only safely receive those things if we get them first through God and then, secondly, from other sources: from relationships with other people, from our jobs, from academic or athletic success, from art and hobbies and sex and other things.

Any kind of teaching that even inadvertently moves the focus off of God as the source and the fountainhead of all good things even one one-thousandth of a degree is to that degree false and will start to lead you astray and make you sick. Any kind of distortion in the biblical message will eventually lead to disillusionment, pain, and destruction. We must test the spirits because false teaching will make us sick.

*Third, we must test the spirits for the sake of the Christian witness to the world around us.* Thanks to big, conference-style gatherings, to social media, and to book publishing, it is easier today than ever for false teachers to gather followers in huge numbers. Now many of these followers are faithful, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving Christians.

But you've got to be careful, because all it takes is seeing a quick, two-minute clip of a preacher on Facebook, giving that preacher's Facebook profile a “like”, and then you're listed among his followers. You really don't know anything about that guy or his doctrine or his life, but you've endorsed him. Or you hear about a conference, and you don't really know anything about the speakers but a lot of your friends are going so you sign up, and now you've given an endorsement. Or you buy a book by this author because you heard from a friend how it helped her, and now you're a follower. Not whole-heartedly following, but certainly a follower in some sense.

The problem with that is sooner or later the false prophets will reveal themselves by the fruit of their lives. They can't help it. They can hide their true selves for a time, but sooner or later the false prophets will hurt other people, they will take advantage of other people, they will use others, or break their promises and be revealed for what they are.

Jesus says this in Matthew 7:15-17: “<sup>15</sup> “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.”

And every time one of these false teachers with thousands of Christian followers falls, it undermines the faith because the media jumps all over it and those outside of Christianity look at it and say, “See – this guy had five hundred thousand followers on Facebook. Christians must have loved that guy, but he embezzled all that money. Why should I believe in Jesus if some many of the believers were foolish enough to follow that guy?” Or, “See – this guy had a best-selling book marketed to Christians and spoke all the time to Christian groups, but he’d been cheating on his wife for years. Why should I pay any attention to the Christian message if they follow a guy like that?”

It’s hard enough for the gospel message to pierce the hearts of unbelievers without us carelessly endorsing those who wind up blowing it in their life or in their doctrine. Therefore, for the sake of the witness of the gospel among outsiders, we must learn to test the spirits.

Second, how can we test the spirits? 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.”

So from these verses we learn that any teaching that denies that Jesus Christ is fully God and also fully man (that’s the “in the flesh” part) is false, or opposed to Christ (that’s what “antichrist” means in this context). This test would rule out many of the world religions like Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, and other systems of thought like Scientology.

But I don’t think John meant to limit the doctrinal test just to the deity of Christ and the incarnation. John probably had in mind a particular heresy then sweeping through the church called “Gnosticism.” The Gnostics taught that Jesus only appeared to be a man, he only seemed to take on flesh, but he never really became human.

John targeted that false teaching, but he still insists elsewhere in his writings that it’s vital for Christians to believe that the death of Jesus on the cross atoned for our sins. He insists elsewhere that Jesus was resurrected after three days in the grave and that Jesus will return for his people at the end of the age. He insists that we are all sinners and we must repent and trust in Jesus’ life and death to be saved. Therefore, according to the test John gives us in the totality of his writings, Mormons propagate a false teaching. Christian Scientists and the Jehovah’s Witnesses propagate false teaching.

But I doubt many of you here this morning will be tempted to join another world religion or become a Jehovah's Witness. No one at Grace that I know of has ever been led out of the Christian faith by those Mormon missionaries you'll see walking around Oxford from time to time. It's easy to spot them so I'm not too worried about that happening.

Much more difficult is to discern truth from error among those teachers who claim to be Christians, who on paper actually do believe in orthodox, biblical Christianity, and who in many ways are helpful *but who nevertheless are badly off in their doctrine in some way*. It's those teachers I'm most concerned about.

Does this passage have any instruction to help us with that? Yes, in two ways. *First, John tells us how to test apparently Christian teaching*. Look at verse 6. "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." Who is the "we" here? Not the elders of Grace Bible Church. No one alive today. The "we" refers to the apostles to whom Jesus entrusted the message of Christianity and by whom the New Testament was written.

The apostles wrote the New Testament, and anyone who refuses to listen to the New Testament does not know God. John says that only by knowing the New Testament and how it explains and interprets the Old Testament, which means knowing the Bible, ***can you discern the Spirit of truth from the spirit of error.***

**And you must know the Bible thoroughly.** One of the reasons why there is so little discernment among Christians is we lack an understanding of Scripture that is thorough and complete. Too many Christians just kind of float between different churches and ministries and teachers and say, "I heard a really good message by this guy" or "the music is really good over here" or "I really enjoyed this book" but there's no attempt to get a full, systematic understanding of what the Bible says.

If some pastor denies something that is clearly taught in the Bible, that's easy to spot. But far more often the kind of false teaching that infiltrates the church is the kind that takes some doctrine or truth that is mentioned in the New Testament but then *blows it all out of proportion*.

Do you know what a caricature is? It's a cartoon where the artist renders a likeness of someone's face that you can kind of recognize, but she exaggerates the proportions of the various features on the face – making this bigger, this smaller – so that the final image is no longer accurate representation of what this person looks like. That's what these false teachers do – they don't come out and deny Jesus is God, but they so distort what the Bible says that it winds up being a false teaching. They produce a caricature of biblical Christianity.

*But how can you spot a caricature of the New Testament if you don't have a thorough understanding of the real thing?* You can't. It is, by the way, your responsibility to do this. I can't as your pastor do this for you. You have the right and indeed the duty to private judgment in these matters. The freedom of conscience belongs to you.

*For you must equip yourself to test the spirits with every teacher you encounter including me.* I am a sinner, I am a fallen human being, and that means sin has infected every part of my being, including my intellect. When I get up to preach, I certainly try my best to preach the Bible and to emphasize the things the Bible emphasizes. But I'm sure that to some degree I'm also creating a caricature of Christianity. It can't be helped. I don't know how I'm messing up, or I'd change. So you must know the Bible so that you can test the spirits even with me.

To help you do this I'm going to give you an example to study and, in so doing, name names. I don't enjoy doing this, I know it will offend some people who hear this, because they like this ministry and feel they've been helped by it. But I think it's important to illustrate my point.

The fastest growing movement in our country today that calls itself Christian is what is known as New Apostolic Christianity, or Independent Network Charismatics. Bethel Church in California is a flagship church of this movement. If you've never heard of this group I assure you some of your friends have – they have a footprint even in Oxford. They are big on signs and wonders. They believe the miraculous gifts on display during the period of the New Testament (like the gifts of prophesy and healing) are still active today, and they believe that every Christian can and indeed has a duty to perform miracles.

Now, does the New Testament talk about miraculous gifts? Yes. You can read about them in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. In fact, I think there is no biblical reason to think that those gifts have ceased. The Bible indicates that those gifts can be given by God to his people today.

But you only read about these gifts in those two chapters of the New Testament, plus a brief reference in Galatians 3. You can read accounts of miracles in the four gospels and in the book of Acts, but you don't read about those gifts anywhere else in the Bible outside those chapters. Therefore, you can read all of Romans, all of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude, and the Revelation (books full of instruction for Christian living) without reading anything about miraculous gifts. No one can argue this is a major theme in the New Testament.

But you'd never know that from the New Apostolic Christians. The overwhelming focus of Bethel Church and its missionary training school is miraculous healings and prophecies, and it seems they fail to emphasize what the New Testament focuses on, like repentance, patience in suffering, loving one another (even your enemies), and longing for the return of Christ.

By the way, there are accounts of healings in this movement, but the healings are almost always underwhelming. I watched one service last week getting ready for today and the pastor said, "I'm praying now for people in the room who have a decreased range of motion in a joint due to an athletic injury. Get ready to be healed." He prayed and waited a few minutes and said, "Now, raise your hands if you feel 80% better or more." People raised their hands.

Maybe that impresses you, but when people were healed in the New Testament there was no 80% rule. Rather, the paralyzed walked. The deaf heard. The blind saw. The dead were raised. I don't know of a single instance of that kind of healing from this movement.

I'm not saying don't listen to the pastors in this movement and don't read their books. Again, you have the freedom of conscience. I will not bind it. But I am saying, "Test the spirits." Watch their services, compare what they emphasize with what the New Testament emphasizes, and just see if everything is in the right proportion. If you find that things are badly out of whack, reject what is distorted as false. And if you find a great deal of it distorted you won't want to expose yourself to very much of it.

*Second, John points out characteristics among some Christian teachers that you should keep an eye on.* John warns us about certain characteristics among Christian teachers that, when they are present, should cause you to go into more of a "test the spirit" mode than you otherwise would. Just because these characteristics are present doesn't mean this teacher is a false prophet, but it means they merit a second look.

"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." 1 John 4:1. What's the opposite of the world? The church. John's warning us to be careful when a Christian teacher is disconnected from the church. And there's a lot of this today, more than at any other point in history as best I can tell, because of the celebrity Christian phenomenon. My definition of a celebrity Christian is someone who got famous for one reason (because he is a politician, or an actor, or successful in business, or a coach or an athlete), but then word got out he is a Christian and now churches and conferences invite him to speak and Christian publishers want him to write a book. They invite him not because he knows the Bible but because they know with his name it will sell.

Just because someone is a celebrity doesn't mean she is a false teacher. But teachers in this group need a second look from believers because what keeps Christian teachers grounded is their involvement in the local church. Real, biblical Christianity is meant to be lived out and practiced in a community of believers. If a celebrity Christian does not have that kind of fellowship (and frankly it's really hard for them to have that as, after all, they are celebrities), then they are at greater danger of a public fall from grace (because they lack accountability) and it's going to skew their teaching. They won't think to apply the Bible the way it was meant to be applied, because they are disconnected from the life of the local church. It's much easier for their teaching to be confused. ***Remember that Jesus Christ does not need a celebrity endorsement,*** and John says to give them a closer inspection.

Now let's read 1 John 4:5: "5 They [the false teachers] are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them."

Who saw the royal wedding yesterday morning? By far my favorite part was the sermon. It was a sermon by an American bishop – the Bible was taught and the love of God displayed through Jesus Christ's death was clearly preached.

But did you notice how all the royals reacted? Once the sermon started, Charles kept his head down and never made eye contact. Camilla looked offended. Kate and William smirked at each other as if to say, "I wonder what grandma is thinking." Well, the queen did not look as if she enjoyed it either. Philip scowled at him. So did Elton John.

Why? I've seen those reactions in other people before when I've preached. Maybe it was culture shock, but I think it was because *they were not accustomed to listening to the gospel of Jesus Christ*. Meghan was – she smiled the whole time, the way so many of you smile at me.

One of the main ways you can tell a false teacher is when people who do not know Jesus Christ listen to them and speak well of them, but then when the gospel is clearly preached these same people won't listen to it. It either won't make any sense to them or they will just get angry. John says to watch out for that. "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." 1 Corinthians 2:14.

It's not fun to preach on the subject of false teachers, because I know this sermon must sound overly critical to some of you. Maybe some of you think this is just sour grapes because I'm jealous of some teachers out there that by every measure are far more successful than I'll ever be.

So let me give you one last reason why discernment among Christians is critical. The heart of Christianity is a man dying on a cross to love and serve the people around him. When the first Christians took that into the very heart of their life, how did they live? They loved each other deeply, from a sincere heart. They cared for the poor, both their own and those outside the faith. They took in abandoned children. They promoted the welfare and personhood of women for the first time in human history.

Why? Because they believed the gospel of Jesus Christ without any mixture of error. They believed they were saved by *sheer grace* through faith in Jesus Christ, they could not feel superior to anyone else – they were sinners who deserved condemnation, so how could they possibly trample on anyone else? How could they dare be selfish? And because they were *saved* by sheer grace, they were free to spend their lives in service for others because they knew God could do more with their lives than they ever could. But they had to hold onto the truth and nothing but the truth, because when any kind of false teaching slips into the church it wrecks the transformative power of the gospel.

We don't test the spirits because we have to be right and prove everyone else wrong. We test the spirits because it's our only hope to live the kind of powerful lives those first Christians lived. Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:31-32. Only if you know the truth will you be free, so friends I urge you to test the spirits. AMEN