

TESTING THE SPIRITS

1 John 4:1-6

INTRODUCTION

On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, a surprise attack came out of the sky. The attack had been launched 200 miles north of Pearl Harbor from the decks of six aircraft carriers belonging to the Japanese Imperial Navy. It caught the U.S. completely off guard. In less than two hours, the assault destroyed the U.S. battleships. Only six U.S. planes managed to get into the air to defend against the attackers. The attack took 2330 American lives and left 1145 wounded. Some say it was the most humiliating defeat ever suffered by American forces.

The reason for the devastation was that the American forces were unprepared. Responsibility for this unpreparedness has never been completely defined.

→ Most military historians believe America's leaders were convinced Japan would never attack because its navy and economy were too weak to wage a major war.

Beloved, in the same way we are in a supernatural battle between two spiritual realms. This is not a dualistic two spiritual realms – there are not two equal sides. But we must be prepared because the enemy is powerful. God would have all of His children to be armed and to be ready.

One of the areas which would cause a child of God to not be ready - to be weakened - would be a blending together or a confusion between:

- truth and error
- between biblical love and biblical hate
- between Christ and the Antichrist
- between genuine and counterfeit
- between the Spirit of God and lying spirits
- between Prophets of Truth and prophets of falsehood

Jesus told us there will be tares among the wheat in the local church.

Ligon Duncan – *“in our day and age, in our generation ... I want to suggest this: second only to our need for a heart of holiness is our need for discernment.”*

Please turn in your Bibles to 1 John chapter 4.

4:1-6 → deals with the subject of Truth

4:7-21 → deals with the subject of Love

John is writing to believers who are threatened with false teaching

→ **2:18a** – “Children ... even now many antichrists have arisen”

3:24 is the first explicit reference to the **Holy Spirit** in 1 John

→ sets stage for **4:1-6**

→ **READ 1 John 4:1-6**

Proposition: 3 Rules of War for the Believer:

- I. **Divine Command**
- II. **Discerning Criteria**
- III. **Distinguishing Character**

So That: Answer the following: Should we believe everything?

Should we believe nothing?

So That:

How to keep your head when it seems like everyone else is losing theirs.

I. Divine Command **1 John 4:1**

We understand that John is writing primarily to believers.

Point – The contrast in our text is NOT between true and false Christians. The contrast is between true and false teachers.

John gives one command with both positive and negative elements.

Proof – “¹**Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.**”

“**do not believe every spirit**” – from the Greek word πιστεύω
– this is the same root as ‘faith’

3:23 – “And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another,”

In the Greek grammar, which is more expressive than English grammar John is saying → Don’t start believing! There is an urgency to it. He wants us to avoid extreme superstition which believes everything AND to avoid extreme suspicion which believes nothing.

“**but test the spirits to see whether they are from God**” –
This word ‘test’ literally means to ‘*examine; to determine genuine; prove through testing*’

The 4th century B.C. Greek orator Isocrates was one of the **Ten Attic orators** of the classical era (5th–4th century B.C.)
→ he used this word to describe the testing of metals.

In the Septuagint → **Prov 17:3** – “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests hearts.

Beloved, note also → This is not merely discernment that God is talking about here. This is discrimination .

Now, **discrimination** has become a dirty word in our age and culture.

Illustration – But, must we not all discriminate when we go to the medicine cabinet? To do otherwise could be catastrophic.

Illustration – My oldest sister was an accomplished Civil Engineer. She was the first woman to achieve different awards

in the entire civil engineering field. She retired as a Vice President at the global engineering company CH2M Hill Company based up in Portland OR.

And I can tell you with confidence, my sister would certainly say that civil engineers must discriminate when they calculate what are acceptable load stresses on a bridge or material densities on an airport tarmac.

Application – In the same way we must discriminate.

1 Thess 5:20-22 – “do not despise prophetic utterances. ²¹But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.”

Application – Beloved, we cannot pass on the Truth unless we protect the Truth. We cannot guide, unless we guard. We cannot tend the wounded unless we tear down the wall.

Grammatically, this is written in the present imperative – keep on testing → this is a standing order/rule of war!

We don't need a “why” at this point. But God gives us a “why.” → “**because many false prophets have gone out into the world**” – ψευδοπροφήτης – literally means “pseudo-prophets”

Grammar → perfect tense → this is a sad abiding reality

Illustration – In the same way Jesus said, “you will always have the poor with you” - we will always have false prophets with us → The world is drowning in a sea of demonic lies.

Point – These are NOT well-meaning teachers with an erroneous message. These are men (and women) who declare their message under the inspiration of evil spirits, agents of Satan.

Proof – **2 Pet 2:1** – “false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will

secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

Illustration – Deut 18:22; Jer 28:9

→ **1 Kgs 22** (Micaiah vs. paid mouthpieces) – Micaiah’s prophecy was accurate but the prophecy of the false prophet’s were inaccurate.

→ **Deut 13:1-3** - there is an even stricter criteria than if the prophecy comes true – it is the Word of God!

Application – In the same way, we are to avoid the pseudo’s and bypass the substitutes.

Illustration – If I subtly started introducing things that were in conflict with the Word of God, how long do you think I would last at STBC? Not long → We have godly discerning elders.

BUT ... Let’s say I and the rest of the elders were suddenly inflicted with mass insanity, how long do you think that would last with this congregation? → Not long. Because you would rise up because you are good Bereans!

Application – The command from John is given to all. The pastors and elders lead the guard, but the responsibility rests on the shoulders of every Christian: → young, old; new, mature.

II. Discerning Criteria 1 John 4:2-3

Point – The fundamental question → What does the preacher/teacher say about Christ?

Proof – “**By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God;**”

“**By this you know the Spirit of God**” – plural
→ the entire congregation!

“**every spirit that confesses**” – *homologeō* – “say the same”

Every teacher following a deceitful spirit is marked by **deception** and **defamation**. Every teacher following the Spirit of God is marked by **confession**...starting with “Who is Jesus Christ?”

“**that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God**”

Some would respond: “He was a good teacher. He was a good man ... a good prophet ... a king ... maybe even a priest ...”

→ But, is your Jesus, or in the context here, the Jesus that is being taught, the Jesus that is being shared corporately and privately, the real Jesus?

Half-truths, you see, are more dangerous than **bold lies**.

Recall the **Hypostatic Union** → The union of the deity of Christ and the humanity of Christ is without **confusion**, without **change**, without **division**, and without **separation**.

Application – How many gods? **1 God**.

→ How many persons in the Godhead? **3 Persons**.

→ How many persons is the Son? **1 Person**.

→ How many natures does the Son have? **2 Natures**.

I don’t have time to go in detail into this today but “**has come**” – grammatically this is a perfect participle → it is complete in the past with continuing effect → wonder of the Incarnation and the Immutability of God – Both are true!

Also, we believe in the plenary inspiration of the Bible (inspired equally in all parts). Every **jot** and **tittle** from the Bible is inspired by God and without error in the original autographs!

“**in the flesh**” Not “into the flesh” → going against Cerinthian Gnosticism (Cerinthus) – contemporary of John at Ephesus

– Cerinthus said that the Spirit came upon Jesus at baptism, empowered His ministry, but then left Him before the crucifixion

“in the flesh” Not “as the flesh”

→ here John is guarding against Docetic Gnosticism – this was the teaching that Jesus only had the phantom appearance of a man, He didn’t leave footprints.

Also note! Other men do not **“come in the flesh.”** They are “born of the flesh” (John 3:6). Only Jesus came in the flesh.

The apostolic message of the Incarnation gathers everything: Virgin Birth, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension

1 Tim 3:16 – “by common confession great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, beheld by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”

Beloved, the person of Jesus Christ is the storm center always – the battle for the Truth begins and moves at this point.

Life’s Most Important Question → **Matt 16:13-15** – “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He *began* asking His disciples, saying, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’¹⁴ And they said, ‘Some *say* John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.’¹⁵ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’”

On this teaching, on the person of Christ, everything that calls itself “Christian” stands or falls. All heresies, all cults, begin with assault and error regarding the nature of Christ
→ **2:22-23**

→ If we don’t get Jesus right, everything else goes wrong.

“^{3a}**and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God”**

This is a sharp antithesis here. There is NO intermediate position. There is no such thing as benign religious teaching. There is no middle ground. There is no spiritual Switzerland, so to speak.

→ It is either **Divine** or **demonic**.

This is broader in scope than if John had said, “every spirit that denies Jesus.” It is not enough to just not deny Christ. The teacher, the message, must confess and teach the biblical Christ.
→ We cannot avoid this decisive issue.

F.F. Bruce – *“No matter how charming, how plausible, how eloquent the prophets in question may be, the test of their witness to Christ and His truth is the test by which they must be judged.”*

“^{3b}**and this is the spirit of the antichrist**” – only appears from the Apostle John – in **2:18** (twice), **22**; 4:3; **2 John 7**

John deals ruthlessly with these false prophets and their evil teaching and the evil spirits. He deals with them ruthlessly spiritually and intellectually, not physically. Never physically.

→ Christianity is NEVER defended by the sword.

→ Until Christ returns as the conquering lion. And then He will be the One who will defend with the sword, not us.

“^{3c}**of which you have heard that it is coming**” –

→ Among others, Daniel, Jesus, Paul, and now John

“^{3d}**and now it is already in the world.**” –

2 Thess 2:7 – “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work”

Just as Christ came out from the Father and into the world to do the work of the Father ... so also

... these evil spirits and false prophets have come from their evil abode into the world to do the work of Satan.

Application – Interesting John doesn't bother mentioning supernatural signs and wonders. There may or may not have been false signs/wonders, sensationalistic excesses. But black and white John goes right for the jugular. He doesn't deal with the sensationalistic excesses if there was such a thing. He goes right to → The Message! The Truth!!

III. Distinguishing Character 1 John 4:4-6

Point – Distinguishing character of who we are and who they are. Addresses origin and nature. There are 3 emphatic pronouns at the beginning of vv. 4-6

→ 3 Groups: “**You**,” “**We**,” “**They**”

→ A Divine origin or a Diabolical origin

The 1st Group ...

A. **You** 1 John 4:4

Point → Your True Identity → Your Divine Heritage

Proof – “^{4a}**You are from God, little children**” – literally translated as “You, yourselves ...” – **You** have been **born twice** (**They** (false teachers) have only been born **once**).

“**and have overcome them**” – be victorious, win, defeat, conquer – grammatically uses perfect tense → You **have already conquered them!** A completed act in the past with a continuing effect going forward.

→ The **Battle is decided**, even though it is not yet over.

The battle still rages.

This is not a physical battle. Not even a moral battle. This is an intellectual battle.

One commentator said it well

– “*There are no benefits to ignorance or to sloppy thinking.*”

“^{4b}because greater is **He who is in you** than **he who is in the world.**” → the Divine Indwelling Enabler

He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

The Holy Spirit is greater than Satan.

The Spirit of Truth is greater than the spirit of Error.

➔ **This looks backward, not forward!**

The Devil is an already defeated enemy.

Illustration – 2 Kgs 6:8-23 (emphasis v. 16) “do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them”. The Aramians were threatening the nation of Israel. Elisha prayed that God would open the eyes of his fearful servant and when the servant opened his eyes he saw a multitude of chariots of fire of the armies of the Lord in the mountains surrounding Elisha.

Application – The **black and white truth** of the apostolic message, the Gospel, must not be allowed to shade off and melt into a neutral tint.

The **2nd Group** ...

B. They **1 John 4:5**

Point – You will know them by the **character** of who they are and the **content** of what they say; again he is speaking to the origin and the nature.

Proof – “⁵**They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world**”

The **character** → Their message reveals who they are. They have no connection with the divine fountain of revealed truth because their origin is in the world.

The **content** → what they say. They distort and deform the message of God.

Illustration – How and why do the liberal worldly minded love and embrace the violent religion of Islam? A religion that treats women like chattel? A religion rife with rape? A religion that hates gays? A religion that destroys freedom? ... How? Why?

The answer is in our text.

→ “**and the world listens to them**”

→ People in the world want to hear they are OK. They do not want to hear about a Creator God to whom they are accountable. The world will take any false teaching over the true Word of God.

The grammar in the Greek (genitive rather than accusative) communicates it is the message that is appealing to the world, not so much the messengers.

Illustration – I remember twenty- five years ago on Margie’s and my first mission trip to Venezuela, I had the great youthful wisdom of ordering a steak ...a rare steak... in Venezuela ... and I had a little visitor on my trip back to the states. I remember travelling back rolling back and forth holding my stomach. While I was eating that steak, I didn’t see that little bacteria that was inside that steak.

Application – In the same way, that little dollop that was not visible to my trained eye can get into our spiritual diet, can have the same effect.

The 3rd Group ...

C. We

1 John 4:6

Point – The collective testimony of all the apostles.

The **Apostolic Message**. The **Gospel**. The teaching of the New Testament → the measure of Truth and sound doctrine.

Proof – “**We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.**”

“**We are from God**” – The man of God teaches the flock.
He does not tickle the flock.

“**he who knows God listens to us**” – through the illumination of the indwelling Holy Spirit, in which we all participate

Illustration – As the **eye** follows the dawning light, as the intent **ear** follows the breaking of sweet music, as the famished **appetite** follows the scent of wholesome food.

Application – So also, the **soul that seeks** God, from whatever distance, knows when it hears this Word of salvation.

→ The response to the Word reveals the nature of the hearer.
Hearing receptively and confessing genuinely

But → “**he who is not from God does not listen to us**” –
The reason this one does not listen to the Word is his origin

John 8:47 – “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear *them*, because you are not of God.”

Point – Some things are always true. And some things are always false. And there are only two ways →

“**By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.**”

- Literally “the spirit of the truth” → There is a body of doctrine. There are boundaries to our faith.

Truth is:

Defined by God’s Character

Declared in God’s Word

Discovered in God’s Son and

Developed by God’s Spirit

“**error**” – wandering, straying about, being led astray from the right way.

Euripides and **Plato** used this word to describe one who roams hither and yon.

In the New Testament, it describes mental straying, deceit, fraud

Aristotle and **Plutarch** used this word to describe wandering stars as did the half brother of Jesus:

Jude 1:12-13 – “These men are those who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; ¹³wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever.”

→ literally “the spirit of the error”

“**the truth** ... **the error**” – these are two antithetical realms that cannot coexist. They cannot mix. There is no neutrality between them.

<p>Truth is the promise of <u>hope</u> and <u>joy</u>. Error is the threat of <u>despair</u> and <u>misery</u>.</p>

Illustration – An Ethiopian proverb → “**Poison** is never so dangerous as when it is mixed with food.”

Application – So **error** is never so dangerous as when it is the alloy of **Truth**. Pure error will be rejected. But when mixed, **error** makes use of the **Truth** and gets an audience where otherwise it would have none.

This is why this is so important. This is why we are driven to the Word in all we do.

CONCLUSION