

## 6,4,26 1 Jn. 4:1-6, Testing the Spirits

(1 Jn. 4:1-3) 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. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 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.

The Incarnation is the foundational truth of Christianity and that truth had come under attack from the movements that were invading the early Church. Here's a brief description of the most popular heresy at that time;

There were many false prophets who taught that our Lord Jesus Christ was a remarkable youth, a child born into this world in many respects the superior of any other child, a religious genius, who from budding consciousness was God-intoxicated. His sole direction in life was toward a greater knowledge of deity. He was always reaching out after God. They teach that Jesus was so constantly under God's influence and so absorbed in Him that He eventually became like Him.

The Gnostics of John's time had a slightly different take;

They believed that Jesus was a divine, spiritual messenger sent from the true, supreme God to bring special knowledge (gnosis) to humanity, rather than a savior who died for sins. He is seen as a revealer who taught that the physical world is a prison and that salvation comes from recognizing one's own divine inner nature.

Sounds a lot like New Age theology 101.

The Nicolaitans didn't try to define the nature of Christ, they focused on what He accomplished for us, but what they believed about that was distorted. Here's their beliefs;

The Nicolaitans were a 1st-century group condemned for promoting compromise, sexual immorality, and eating food sacrificed to idols. They are generally considered libertines who used a false understanding of grace to justify pagan practices. They viewed Jesus as a Savior whose grace granted total freedom from moral laws, allowing them to indulge in sexual immorality and idolatry. They embraced a form of antinomianism, arguing that because they were under grace, their physical actions (deeds of the flesh) did not affect their spiritual standing.

Those are the specific “false doctrines” John was battling in his letters, which is why he worded things the way he did. John decided that the most important thing to address was our belief in the Incarnation. So-called prophets may branch off into a myriad of false teachings that various New Testament writers addressed, but if they didn’t at least teach the true identity and nature of Christ, they were considered messengers of Satan.

As I mentioned in a previous study, the wolves in sheep’s clothing that are working their way into the Church today aren’t using the same doctrines as John was up against, but the danger of deception is still very much alive today. That’s why vs. 1<sup>st</sup> Jn. is ageless and is needed just as much today as it was in John’s time;

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.

You’ll notice that John ties “spirits” to “false prophets” or teachers. Behind the flesh and blood man in the pulpit is an angelic being guiding his thoughts, actions and teaching. Behind a *true* teacher is the Holy Spirit. The point being, that the visible world is simply an expression of the activity in action in the invisible world; which is another reason “spiritual discernment” is so crucial.

If all we are using to “test the spirits” are our natural senses and reasoning, we aren’t going to see the full reality of whatever we’re examining. As we’ve seen in Heb. 6, our “spiritual senses” have to be trained and matured to distinguish truth from error in the unseen world.

I'm sure in John's time, just like in ours, false teachers and prophets "appeared" to be ministers of righteousness and truth; if they didn't, they wouldn't deceive anyone.

(1 Cor. 11:3-4, 13-15) I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it! . . . For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness.

The bottom-line is, 'Don't be impressed by that which is impressive' – we have to go deeper than the surface to be safe.

It's also interesting that John gathers all these false prophets and puts them under one spiritual Head – the spirit of Antichrist; vs. 3, "This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world."

The "spirit of Antichrist" has its origin in Satan – the deceiver of the nations, and that spirit, that instrument of the enemy, has been around since the garden. Since John's time, it's been focused on learning all it can about this new thing called "the Church", the "Body of Christ", in order, through deception, to limit or destroy the Church's spiritual advance.

Another thing to keep in mind about the "spirit" of Antichrist, is to remember that this is a deceptive spirit that does not present itself as someone that is against Christ, but as someone who *is* Christ – the deception of the world could be any false religion, but the deception of the Church (which John is addressing) is done in the power of imitation.

Like we just saw in 1 Cor. 11, the deception aimed at the Church is offering them "another Jesus". This is one reason our Lord asked the question, "Who do men say

that I am?" The response was several options, but only Peter spoke up and gave the right response;

(Matt. 16:13-17) When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So, they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

Besides the fact that Peter got it right, the most important thing to notice about this particular conversation is Jesus's explanation for *why* Peter was right; "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." Knowing the true Christ can *only* happen by revelation, not by men's opinions of who He is.

Christ immediately took this whole conversation to what Paul realized in 1 Cor. 12:3; "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit."

Being able to distinguish the true Jesus from imitation Jesus's ('anti' – Christs), is only possible by spiritual revelation. Since the Corinthians were operating primarily by their soul, their mind, they were giving into all sorts of false Christs.

Now, if we bring this up to date, knowing that God's purpose for us is to be conformed to the image of the true Christ and knowing that this can't happen if we are focused on, and learning about, an imitation Christ, Satan's deception for us is simply to get all of us using our soul to determine Truth and leaving the human spirit out of it. So, now, Christianity is presenting almost as many different Jesus's as there are denominations. If we all saw and learned of the true Jesus, there wouldn't be any divisions in the body of Christ. It's not just an issue of various doctrines; underneath it all, it's an issue of soul insights versus spiritual revelation. The unity that the Lord wants to see in the universal Body of Christ can't exist without common vision, especially concerning what Jesus is really like.

As we've seen in Prov. 29:18, "Where there is no vision, the people (lit.) disintegrate." In Phil. 2:2 Paul puts it like this; "Fulfill my joy by being like-minded . . . being of one accord, of one mind."

(Rom. 15:5-6) May the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(1 Cor. 1:10) Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind.

All around the world, in every pulpit or podcast that claims to be Christian, believers are being presented with a picture or image of Christ. None of them are perfect, because it's likely that no pastor or teacher in our generation knows as much as Paul did, but Christ is a Person, not just a collection of character traits. And however He's being seen in any church, it's the likeness of *that* Person which will determine what we are being conformed to.

If their Jesus is the "seeker sensitive church" Jesus, people tend to care less about Biblical truth than about making everyone feel welcome. The true Christ received anyone who came to Him, but never at the expense of what He knew to be true and righteous – in other words, He never compromised to avoid controversy. As we've seen before, He Himself said He didn't come to bring peace, but a sword;

(Matt. 10:34-36) "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

If the church you're checking out is Reformed or Calvinistic, the people tend to be legalistic because they don't understand the wonder of Grace.

We could do this with any church who presents "another Jesus" – the people will take on the characteristics of the Jesus they worship. If that Jesus is willing to compromise or skip-over the Truth to avoid offending anyone, the people will have

that same mindset. If He's a Jesus that uses His sovereignty to essentially cancel Man's free will, then along with their gratitude for being the chosen ones, the people tend to be prideful and look down on the *unchosen*.

The tragedy of our time in history, just as in John's time, is that it's only a remnant who are seeing Christ as He really is and are therefore being conformed to the image the Lord desires for them to have. The rest are accepting and following "another Jesus". More unbelievers have been turned off to Christianity because of their association with Christians who are *not* like their Lord, than for any other single reason. Satan knows that the one thing people use more than anything else to move them into a place of faith and belief, is what the person is like who claims represent what they are calling the 'absolute truth'.

We know people rejected Christ and will reject those who *accurately* represent Him, but to use Biblical phraseology, "woe unto those who misrepresent the Lord" because of their unwillingness to dig deep enough in God's Word to discover Christ as He is. And, unfortunately, that "woe" goes double for those who are claiming to represent the Lord from the pulpits of His Church. There is a very healthy "fear of the Lord" that should rest solidly in the heart of anyone who opens the Bible and attempts to tell people what it's saying and what it means.

This is Zane Hodges' comments on our passage in 1 Jn. 4;

The mention of the Holy Spirit causes John to pause for a warning that has been needed in every age of the Christian Church. The Christian who possesses the Holy Spirit must not be so naïve as to think that God's Spirit is the only spirit at work in this world. Satan has many spirits who serve him here, as is shown by the fact the "many false prophets have gone out into the world."

For John, the solution, the protection for us, was centered in making sure all believers know how to abide in Christ and how to have His words abide in them (just as our Lord told us in John 15). So, to stay with John's approach to this, it's imperative that we be in constant prayer to *not* be deceived, and that we study God's Word thoroughly enough to recognize Truth from Deception.

To abide is to be fully transparent before the Lord, no unconfessed or justified sin, and to spend as much time as possible being what a disciple is meant to be – one who learns from his Master.

If we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us. Our only place of safety is staying near to the Jesus that God reveals to us through His Word and by His Spirit. We will never see Christ as He is if the source of our understanding is “flesh and blood”. Knowing any truth from God’s Word, especially that which reveals the true Jesus to us, can only come by revelation of the Holy Spirit. Just like Paul exhorted us in Eph. 1:17, we have to pray what Paul prays every time we open our Bibles or listen to a pastor or teacher. Here’s that verse from the Amplified Version;

[I always pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may grant you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation [that gives you a deep and personal and intimate insight] into the true knowledge of Him.

So, again, as John warned us in our passage; “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.” This is nearly identical to Jesus’ warning in Matt. 24:4-5; “And Jesus answered and said to them: Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many.”

For us, this is where diligence comes in. We all have a tendency to think that this kind of deception only happens to other Christians, and that it won’t happen to us because we are rock solid in our knowledge of the true Christ. But after over 50 plus years of experience in dozens of churches I can honestly say that the kind of Jesus being presented to the congregations in most of them is either much less than the real one, or he’s not even close.

But even knowing that, I also know that I am not immune from being drawn into some doctrine or movement that is offering an incredibly appealing Christ. If I don’t consistently remain genuinely desperate in my prayers for protection and knowledge of the Truth, I could be pulled away just like anyone else.

I often wonder what was in the hearts of people like John and Paul when they saw what was happening near the end of the first century and sat down to write their

warnings to the churches. Based on some of the language they used, I'd have to say it was combination of extreme sadness and extreme anger; but all of it was motivated by an overwhelming desire, out of pure love, to recover and re-establish the Truth, both for the sake of those they wrote to and also for the sake of the testimony, the Name, of Christ.

I also wanted to take a few minutes to clear up something many of have been taught for a long time that is at best a partial truth.

John told us to test the spirits, test the "many false prophets", etc. I believe most Christians would say that the way we do that is to look at their lives, because when you know that Benny Hinn has become a multimillionaire by hitting people in the forehead and knocking them to the floor, you can be pretty sure that Benny is not accurately presenting the Jesus of the Bible.

However, listen to this passage in Matt. 7:15-20;

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore, by their fruits you will know them.

Benny is obvious; most false teachers aren't that obvious. But there's a misconception about what it means to test someone by their "fruits". Matt. 12:33-37 shows us something else;

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give

account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words, you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Even though examining an alleged prophet or teacher's life is a good thing to do, ultimately the Lord is saying that the fruit most likely to show the reality of this is their words. This is because wolves come to us in sheep's clothing. They look like sheep; they appear beautiful outwardly, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves. Their behavior may not set them apart from sheep, but their message does.

That's also why John said what we saw earlier in 1 Jn. 4;

Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

We don't know everything about their lifestyle, but we do know what their message is (or in this case, isn't). It's also interesting to see that John doesn't say, "every spirit that *denies*", but instead he says, "every spirit *that does not confess* Jesus as Christ in the flesh". The way he worded this shows us that heretical teaching can hide the full extent of its deviation from truth by simply neglecting to affirm some vital part of apostolic teaching. That makes it more acceptable to the Christian audience they're trying to reach. It's subtle, but for the sake of deception it's more successful than just coming out and openly denying a truth that most Christians believe.

Again, in regard to all of this, I'm not worried about those who are listening to our studies, I just want to make sure I'm showing the implications of what John is writing about in case what he wrote could be helpful to anyone.

Now, let's look at something that is indirectly related to John's warning. We've seen that successfully "testing" spirits focuses on the message being conveyed to us, especially if the lifestyle looks "outwardly beautiful". To be able to accurately identify the false teacher's message, we obviously need a good grasp of *Christ's* message so we can compare them.

We also know from 1 Jn. and John 15 that the phrase used for what we most need to have going for us comes under the heading of "abiding in Christ" and His words

“abiding in us”. The first involves prayer and meditation and the second involves faithfully and steadily increasing our knowledge of God’s Word.

But one thing I’ve noticed over the years is that we can get tangled up in details and controversial verses to the point where we end up confused, or we find ourselves involved in what feels like a never-ending argument that seems to go nowhere; like comments and replies on social media that frustrate both debaters and appear to accomplish absolutely nothing.

But there is something that can help us not only focus on what matters most, but something that also clearly lays out the main thing the Lord would have us communicate in the first place regardless of what passage started the debate. And that something is knowing and explaining God’s overall purpose for us with the goal of determining whether the detail we’re debating even fits into the ultimate purpose God is pursuing.

So, listen to these comments by Sparks on this issue of “the big picture”, because without it, we end up not being able to see the forest for the trees;

It is one thing to have a conception or apprehension of the purpose of God, and to be given up to it, but it is an extra thing to know *how* God would realize His purpose. It is vital that we know *the means* He would employ to accomplish it. There are many who have a true conception of what God's purpose is, but the means which they employ are not God's means, the way in which they go to work is not His way, and therefore they find that the Lord does not support them. They may be moving in a true direction, but being out of touch with the method or means, they are compelled to take responsibility for the work themselves, and to search out the resources needed to make it happen. Thus, they find themselves exhausted, brought to a standstill, and having to resort to all kinds of methods, debates, arguments and means to carry on God's work. The work of God becomes a burden upon their shoulders, and the Lord cannot order it otherwise because there is not the fullest fellowship and sympathy between them and *His ways, His methods, His means, His times and the details* of His purpose.

Now, in the case of the Lord Jesus it was quite the contrary. In the details He was in secret fellowship with the Father. He was abiding with Him daily, staying consistent with not only the ultimate purpose, but also with today's actions that would lead to that fulfilment. With the Lord this represented a detailed obedience unto one comprehensive purpose. The only explanation needed by the Savior in any given matter was simply that of knowing that the Father willed it, and without any further word He did it. That was the basis of His relationship. Never do we trace in Him a sign of questioning why a thing should be done in a certain way, or at a certain time and not another, or why certain means should be employed and not others. It was enough that the Father desired it. The explanation came in the justification and vindication that followed. Doing of the will of God was a matter of that obedience which never moves out from self but always out from the Father. As that held good in our Lord's case the spiritual resources of sustenance, maintenance, strength, wisdom and energy were supplied.

If we "test the spirits" on the ground of exposing what the alleged prophet believes as to God's ultimate purpose for His people, we won't have to be confused by the particulars of how God intends to accomplish that purpose.

God's purpose is to have a new creation race of people conformed to the image of our Forerunner; Christ being both the Author and Finisher of our faith. If the person we are examining doesn't believe that Christ is both God's Son as well as God's perfect Representative of the final image and destiny of the Church, and that we personally have no ability to make that happen apart from the work of the indwelling Spirit, then what do *they* think this is all about? Why do *they* think we are here and how does the incarnation and the Cross fit into that purpose? Why were those events necessary for God to reach His goal? And what, exactly, is the part we are to play in this?

How the other person answers all those questions will show whether they do or do not have a clue about the single most important aspect of what this life is all about

– which is the revelation and ultimate fulfillment of God’s purpose in Christ and how we fit into that purpose.

If they can’t clearly nail that down, then whatever so-called “message” they are peddling is either going to be substantially less than what God is after, or it’s going to be a message that isn’t even close to what God is wanting and doing.

So, start there with your conversation instead of debating whether Magog is Russia or Trump is the Antichrist. If they can’t see the big picture, none of the details are going to matter anyway, because they won’t know where they’re going or how they are supposed to get there.

True unity in the faith is built on the foundation of shared purpose, vision and destiny. Without that, no matter what you build on any another foundation, it will eventually crumble into irrelevancy.

Now, we’ll wrap things up by looking at the next section, vs’s 4-6;

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. They are of the world.

Therefore, they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. 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.

In vs’s 4 & 5 the “them” and “they” John is talking about refers to the spirits we are to test and, of course, to the human agents they use to propagate their false teaching. When you and I are filled with Spirit of Christ, when the Holy Spirit is using us to communicate truth to others, we would be classified as being “of God” (vs. 6). The false teachers are “of the world”, therefore the world hears and believes them.

The world recognizes their own and inwardly recoils from those who speak a different spiritual language. We don’t have to try to reach them with human logic or worldly wisdom; if the Spirit of Christ is at work in them, they will respond to the language of heaven whether they realize it’s source or not.

Like Paul told us in Romans 1, it's not us and our great skills of debating and proving what we say that saves people; it's the Gospel that God uses for that;

(Rom. 1:16) For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.

Salvation for the lost and recovery for the deceived saint is a spiritual work of God, it is not accomplished by the reasoning of man. These life-changing events are supernatural events that only God Himself can do. Which means that *our* effectiveness as the Lord's messengers has nothing to do with our persuasiveness or our IQ, we are only as effective as our trust in the hidden work and power of the truth in God's hands which allows us to give them what the Lord knows they need to hear. (Psalm 8:3) "Out of the mouths of babes God has perfected praise".

The Lord will give us what they need; our part is to listen to the indwelling Spirit and trust Him (not us) to guide our conversation. Whether you read Stephen's message to the Jews or Paul's message to the Athenians, you are hearing and watching two men, filled with God's Spirit, offering life to the dead – and because the source of that message *was* God's Spirit, the reaction of the audience was based purely on the spiritual state of their heart at that moment.

You don't have to convince anyone of anything; if they are in a seeking mode and God is at work in them, all you have to do is show up and give them what God gives you. And that's why John starts his discussion of this with this; "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."

Our position in Christ is one of complete authority over all the forces at work against us. There is nothing that *we* can accomplish, or even are *expected* to accomplish, which will change the heart of whoever we're talking to. That battle has already been won and all the satanic forces that would attempt to thwart our success have been defeated. All that's left for us is what Paul tells Timothy in 2 Tim. 2:10; "Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory."

You and I (by faith) give the gospel to the lost, or the truth to the deceived, and the outcome is dependent only on the heart condition of the person we're talking to coupled with the invisible work of the Spirit. Some will believe; some won't, but whichever way it goes, there is absolutely nothing the enemy can do to prevent the person from responding according to the heart of the person. If they are open, they will believe you. If they are closed, they won't.

(2 Chron. 16:9) For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth; to show himself strong in the behalf of those whose heart is upright toward him.

And as we'll see in 1 Jn. 5:12, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

Don't let what we might call "Christian programming" lock you into some system of evangelism that relies on the creativity of well-meaning, but spiritually limited, authors and pastors. You and I aren't the issue; we don't need a "program"; we don't need to be the kind of person who is irrefutable as if our skills of debate will break their will.

All we need is a relationship with the One Who can get through to them and the willingness on our part to follow His lead. (Rom. 8:14) "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the mature sons of God". Our "effectiveness" in reaching the lost, or in persuading a deceived Christian into making a change in their thinking, is dependent *only* on our receptivity to the inward whispering of the Spirit coupled with faith that the Lord will do all that is needed.

We are simply available vessels of clay and our confidence is never in ourselves, but only in the Lord; (Zech. 4:6) "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts."

So, vs. 6 is John summing this up; "By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." When whoever we are talking to is argumentative and closed down, and will only listen to the world's position on things, this is the spirit of error. When they are interested, open and willing to consider what you are saying, this shows us that the foundation of all life change and all advance spiritually comes from the

one characteristic that towers above all the rest – teachability. There is nothing more essential to a lost person being saved or a saved person being delivered from deception than a heart disposition of being genuinely teachable. They don't have to understand much of what they will need later; they just have to be open. God will take care of the rest.

There is a very real sense in which reaching others is based on exactly the same eternal principle as literally everything we do in this life as servants of God – it's living in the reality and atmosphere of having zero faith in ourselves and growing, confident faith in God. It makes life a place of "rest" rather than a place of legalistic worry and fear. Lies encompass us in bondage; the Truth sets free. Faith places all things on the shoulders of our Father and the Truth is that this is exactly what He wants us to do.

(Matt. 11:28-29) Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. . .