

1 John 4:1-6 Test the spirits

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This morning we are back in 1 John and we are going to look at a topic that is often neglected in Christian circles but is vitally important - the topic of testing the spirits.

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From this first letter of John's we see that he not only calls the church to be **loving** but also to be **discerning**. The two must go together in John's eyes for us and the church to be healthy.

Love with brains.

In fact it is unloving not to be aware of and warn others of impending danger. Testing the spirits is a loving response that safeguards ourselves and others when we learn how to discern false prophets, non-genuine believers and false teaching.

Non genuine articles whether they are clothes or watches soon give up and never last as long as the genuine article.

When I was in China in November 07 I avoided buying a watch from any street vendor or any shop for that matter. But one sunny Saturday afternoon in Shanghai this street seller approached me (in fact hundreds approach you) and one particular watch caught my eye that I thought my brother would like. After negotiating the price down to around \$7 aussie dollars I felt pretty happy with my purchase.

Later back at the hotel, I noticed that after I had set the time - the hands just didn't move... I learnt my lesson that day about touching the non-genuine and my brother didn't get his watch.

While we are to be discerning we should never be judgemental. We need to be able to make judgement calls.

Being judgemental is having a condemning attitude, whereby there is never any grace shown to a person or a teaching, only judgement and condemnation. We need to speak the truth in love and allow room for change.

Making a judgement call is different in that it calls into account the thing being judged whether it is a teaching or a character issue, but leaves all final judgement to God. It also means leaving room for change and maturity in a person or their beliefs. At times it might just be immaturity that is on display and not a false believer or false prophet.

We need to develop this ability and learn to discern what is harmful not only in others but also in ourselves. As Jesus said how can we take the speck out of a person's eye if we do not first remove the log that is in our own eye?

So, let's turn to 1 John and pick up from where we left off last week beginning at chapter 4.

1 John 4:1-6

1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

We are encouraged by John to not believe every spirit. In fact it is a sign of genuine believers that they believe many things but they also **do not** believe many things.

We need to avoid gullibility. We need to avoid putting blind trust in people or teachings just because they seem to say and do all the right things.

We need to test the spirits. We need to examine, prove, test, scrutinise the teaching or the person to make sure that they or it is genuine and biblical.

And the reason is that many false prophets have gone out into the world. There are plenty of self deceived people out there leading others astray and we need to be aware of them.

2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

Now the test that John wants us to apply here is foundational and it is this:

Do they confess that Jesus has come in the flesh, that is do they believe that Jesus was and is God and came to earth as a baby who grew into a man and died as a sinless sacrifice for our sin?

If not then they do not belong to God and they are anti-Christ in spirit.

This would include groups like:

Mormons

Jehovah's witnesses

Jews

Muslims

Each of these groups believe that Jesus was a mere man or prophet and not God come to earth in the form of a man and while they may honour him as a man and respect

his teachings they do not believe that his death on the cross has the power to save us from our sin.

4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.

6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

John now concludes this passage by saying that we have overcome them - not that we someday will. It has already happened because greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world.

We can discern and recognise false teaching and false teachers when we see or hear them.

John gives us a foundational truth that Jesus and his glory is the test that we are to use when testing the spirits.

This testing the spirits also doesn't mean looking for demonic spirits but more looking for thoughts, attitudes, teachings and intentions of the heart - the spirit behind the person or teaching

And while John focuses on the deity of Christ. There are other warnings in scripture that call us to be aware of false prophets and their teachings.

Matthew 7:15-20

15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

16 You will recognize them by their **fruits**. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?

17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.

18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.

19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

We are to recognise false prophets by their teaching and also their fruit.

Galatians 5:22-24

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

These are the fruits that help us to distinguish between the genuine and the false.

Great teaching or great displays of power without great character is false and misleading and we need to be discerning in these areas.

Now let's look at a few practical examples from the scriptures.

Acts 8:9-24

9 But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great.

10 They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great."

11 And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.

12 But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

13 Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

14 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John,

15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit,

16 for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

17 Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,

19 saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!

21 You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

22 Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.

23 For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."

24 And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

What do we see with Simon?

If we were to test his spirit what did he want?

Simon was looking for power. We need to be aware of looking for power in all its forms both in us and others. He wanted this power so that he could use it to manipulate others so he could make money and he was rebuked by Peter because his heart was not right.

Acts 12:20-24

20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food.

21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them.

22 And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!"

23 Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.

What do we see with Herod?

If we were to test his spirit what did he want?

Herod wanted glory and God will not share his glory with another.

Beware of people who want to draw glory to themselves and be aware of this in ourselves. Jesus is the only one we need to lift up and when we do he draws all men to himself.

Matthew 7:15-23

15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?

17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.

18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.

19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

20 Thus you will recognize them by their **fruits**.

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'

23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

**What do we see with these people who say Lord, Lord?
If we were to test their spirits what did they want?**

They wanted to be recognised by Jesus for the supernatural works that they supposedly did in his name. Somehow they had an ability to tap into the supernatural and perform miracles, yet with a wrong spirit.

The interesting thing here is that Jesus does not deny that they did these miracles but he goes onto say that he never knew them.

It is a bit of a mystery but if we take a closer look we can see that they are people who are more interested in the display of works for justification before God.

But Lord didn't we do this and do that for you?

They believe that Jesus should accept them because of the works they did rather than the sacrifice that Jesus made for them.

We can never earn God's favour by what we do, no matter what it is. We are given God's favour by his free and unmerited grace. While we deserved judgement - Jesus gives us pardon, mercy, grace and favour.

This is a spirit that we need to be aware of in ourselves that we don't somehow keep an account of the things we do for God and others and then somehow expect something in return from God. If we do we will only set ourselves up for disappointment.

So in finishing, when testing the spirits we need to be aware of these three areas that we and others can fall into.

1. Power (Simon)
2. Glory (Herod)
3. Pride (The unsaved miracle workers)

All of these rob Jesus of his honour and deprive us of our joy. Let's test the spirits and make sure that there is none of this in us and if we discern it in others, then let God be the judge and let us make a judgement call not to be seduced by them.