

Sermon: How We Can Recognize God's Spirit

Text: [1 John 4:1-6 ESV](#)

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Introduction: It is not always easy to comprehend who has God's Spirit or who may speak for God.

Proverbs 14:12 ESV ¹² There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to [of] death.

I believe this can be applied to both teaching and behavior. We all know people who teach correct doctrine generally, but who have fallen morally and ethically, and then can no longer speak for God and be believed. And then we have cults like the Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses who may be right morally and ethically, but speak heresy in their beliefs that Jesus was not God in the flesh - leading people astray.

It is not always easy to determine what is true, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and even a little hindsight we should be able to discern the truth about Jesus. Falsehood dresses in a suit and tie as well as jeans and a polo shirt. The Truth is rarely popular where sin and depravity are being challenged. We will read the entire text in a minute, but it seems to me that if we are popular with the world (**v. 5**) that may only indicate that we are not on God's side.

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 ESV ¹ "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ² and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' ³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ⁴ You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. ⁵ But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil[a] from your midst.

Footnotes: [a] Deuteronomy 13:5 Or evil person

Two or three generations ago many things began to change in how even churches saw morality and Christian witness to a lost world. The church has become a megaphone in some circles for the antichrist spirit and a lifestyle that is devoid of biblical principles.

There are churches who believe in and defend immorality such as homosexuality, transgender and other sexual perversions. Voices from the pew defend abortion and euthanasia and other such interference with what God has created and sustained.

According to the Bible these sins and others not always mentioned will send a person to eternal exclusion from heaven. **I Corinthians 6:9-11 ESV** ⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous[a] will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,[b] ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Footnotes: [a] 1 Corinthians 6:9 Or wrongdoers

[b] 1 Corinthians 6:9 The two Greek terms translated by this phrase refer to the passive and active partners in consensual homosexual acts

No matter how time may change the world's view and acceptance of this sort of behavior, God's word and those that speak for God must remain steadfast in their moral and spiritual life and standards.

The very first verse says we are to TEST the spirits. **I John 4:1 ESV** ¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, **(not everyone is right)** but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Dr. Ralph Wilson shares - John teaches us to "test the spirits," so we can detect the false prophets Jesus warned us about (**Matthew 7:15-20**). The word "test" (NIV, ESV) or "try" (KJV) is δοκιμαζο, "to make a critical examination of something to determine genuineness, put to the test, examine." This word was sometimes used to determine the genuineness of metal -- whether a substance was pure gold, silver, copper -- or a cheap alloy.

How do you "test the spirits"? One of the best ways is by listening and asking questions? A person can be fluent in religious jargon, but his heart may be wrong. Listen and pray; pray for understanding.

There are two tests! One is orthodoxy and the other is where is this information (teaching) coming from? A person who has the gift of discernment can be helpful here. In a part of a longer list about spiritual gifts assigned to God's people we hear: **I Corinthians 12:10 ESV** ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

Steven Cole adds: - After telling us (3:23) that God's commandment is "that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another," John now (4:1) tells us not to believe everything: "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." John was trying to expose these false teachers who had left the church and were drawing disciples after them (2:19, 22-23).

As Ray Stedman points out (*Expository Studies in I John* [Word], p. 296), "It is significant that this warning comes in the midst of John's discourse about love, because false spirits tend to make a great deal of the subject of love. Every cult, every deviant group, every false movement makes its appeal in the name of love."

Like John, the Apostle Paul emphasized the demonic aspect of false teachers. **I Timothy 4:1 ESV** ¹ Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons. Of course, the deceitful spirits and their demonic doctrines teach through people who advocate these false teachings. So we must pay close attention to John's words. He is saying that believers must be discerning in spiritual matters.

I. Orthodoxy Is Critically Important (God-inspired teaching).

Orthodoxy is the generally accepted doctrine or practice of the Church.

From the beginning the Church believed in the:

A. Incarnation

I John 4:2-3 ESV ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses (**or agrees**) 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.

The primary heresy John was combating in Ephesus and elsewhere was a serious error in Christology, i.e., who Jesus is. This error stems from a very strong Greek dualism and resulting Docetism which taught that Jesus couldn't have been divine and also in the flesh. Especially, a divine being couldn't carry the sins of all mankind in his body on the cross. Yet, that is exactly what Jesus did.

In Ephesus there was a heretical teacher named Cerinthus who lived there at the same time as the Apostle John. Cerinthus acknowledged the piety of Jesus of Nazareth, but distinguished between the human Jesus and the divine Christ spirit that descended upon Jesus for a time (starting at His baptism and leaving before the cross).

In our own day, the discerning question may be different, to help us distinguish a modern-day heresy from true Christianity, but the principle is the same: "Test the spirits!"

There needs to be a:

B. Confession of Jesus Christ as Lord

Dr. Ralph Wilson says, - What John is saying is: To tell what a person or teacher in Ephesus believes about Jesus, ask him if he acknowledges that Jesus is Christ "in the flesh," that is: Did Christ inhabit human flesh? Is the man, Jesus of Nazareth, himself the incarnate Christ, the Son of God? This is the basic issue of the doctrine of incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas: Jesus Christ is God in the flesh -- throughout his human life, from the manger to the cross - Emmanuel - God with us.

II. Source of Knowledge (Epistemology)

Q. Where do you get your information about Jesus -Google, Wikipedia or God's Word? Have you noticed how things have rapidly been changing informationally?

Illus. From an article on *Industry Tap* written by David Schilling, the host went on to say that not only is human knowledge, on average, doubling every 13 months, we are quickly on our way, with the help of the Internet, to the doubling of knowledge every 12 hours. I am still trying to program my VHS player/recorder. To put it into context, in 1900 human knowledge doubled approximately every 100 years. By the end of 1945, the rate was every 25 years. The "Knowledge Doubling Curve," as it's commonly known, was created by Buckminster Fuller in 1982. If you want to take this even further down the proverbial road, you combine this with Ray Kurzweil's (Head of Google Artificial Intelligence) "singularity" theory and Google's Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen's ideas which are discussed in their book, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business*, and you have some serious changes to technology, human intelligence and business coming down the pike whether you like it or not.

May I tell you, though, all knowledge is not equal. Sorry about this, but the "village idiot" is not a good person to consult when making a life plan. A person who has loose morals or who has cheated on every relationship is not going to prove to be a good marriage and family resource. Decision making needs to be done with sound/healthy sources.

Sources are very important! - My paper on baptism has three pages of bibliography.

Illus. When you work in the dairy or food industry like I did, it was very important to know where ingredients came from. We did not take the dairy farmer's word for the weight of his load of milk or the butterfat content. We tested it!

I hope you noticed throughout our text the two phrases "from the world" and "from God." The world is fallen and imperfect (sinful). God is holy and perfect and Jesus was as well. Where do you think we ought to search for Truth?

I John 4:4-6 ESV 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.

So where do you think it would be wise to acquire knowledge unto eternal life?

A. From the world (spirit of error)

Dr. Ralph Wilson - "They" in **verse 5** refers to the false teachers; the "we" in **verse 6** refers to the true teachers, namely, the apostles. John is saying that the way you can recognize true believers is if they listen to and accept the apostolic teaching. He goes beyond this to mention the spiritual basis of a person's position. "The Spirit of truth," of course, is the Holy Spirit (**John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13**), who dwells within all those who are born of God.

"The Spirit of falsehood" (NIV) or "error" (ESV, KJV) translates "wandering from the path of truth, error, delusion, deceit, deception." In English we often use the word "spirit" in the sense of an "attitude," but you don't find this definition in Greek. Rather "spirit" (**πνευμα**) refers to an "an independent non-corporeal being, in contrast to a being that can be perceived by the physical senses," in this case, "an activating spirit that is not from God." There is an actual spiritual being behind truth and behind error, as discussed in **verses 2-3**. I'm not saying that people in error are necessarily demon possessed, but they are certainly influenced by a demonic spirit.

The world says all kinds of things that are not true. The world might say that science is objectively true, whereas spiritual matters are subjectively true. If it "works" for you, then it's "true." Pragmatism...

Steven Cole remarks - John tells his beloved flock (**4:1**), "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." Paul said a similar thing. After saying that we should "not despise prophetic utterances," he added, "But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good" (**I Thess. 5:20-21**). True faith is not a blind leap into the dark. It rationally examines its object carefully before putting trust in it.

The world system is built around the principle of taking glory from God and transferring it to proud, self-willed humanity. That was Satan's original temptation to Eve in the garden. He challenged God's word and suggested to Eve that if she ate the forbidden fruit, she would become like God, knowing good and evil (**Gen. 3:1-5**). Any teaching that detracts from God's glory and sovereignty and exalts man by feeding his pride is satanic at the core.

“The world recognizes its own people and listens to a message which originates in its own circle. This explains their popularity.” - John Stott

You will do well if your source of knowledge is:

B. From God (Spirit of Truth)

Again, some understand the “we” of [verse 6](#) to refer to all believers. But it stands in contrast (antithesis) to the apostles. “We [apostles] are from God; the one who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us.” They accept the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as God in human flesh. As we have seen, the one who is not of God does not hear His word ([John 8:47](#); see [1 Cor. 2:14](#)).

This certainly applies to the true believer. You do not have to be an apostle to be discounted by the world. If the world hates and does not follow Jesus, it will hate us and not listen to the very words that could change their eternal trajectory.

See Raymond Brown, p. 497 - “The idea of invisible heavenly spirits who are stronger than earthly opponents (who have their own resources) is not foreign to the O.T. : when Elisha saw the Syrian armies and chariots drawn up, he said, “Fear not, for those who are with us [God and his heavenly armies] are more than those who are with them” ([II Kings 6:16](#)).

Conclusion: Be careful to whom (Whom) you listen. Just like bad company can corrupt good morals, bad teachers can send you to Hell if their teaching is followed. It bothers me tremendously to see people who are claiming to be followers of Christ or their children who are big fans of immoral pop icons, sports heroes or even false teachers in the media. Not everyone who claims to follow Jesus, does - not even presidents. We need to be careful with our models and who we choose to follow.

There would be those today who might use the Apocrypha, or other false writing as Scripture. There have been attempts to create a 5th Gospel through a form of textual criticism, using the *Didache*, and writings like the *Gospel of Thomas*. (Jesus Seminar). When the Church, commentators, or ancient Church fathers write anything, or the minister speaks, it still must be compared to the standard of the Word of God (Bible).

Plummer says something in his commentary regarding prophecies, revelations, and miracles (p. 141): “About all such things there are two possibilities which must put us on our guard: (1) they may be unreal; either by delusions of fanatical enthusiasts, or the lies of deliberate imposters; (2) even if real, they need not be of God. Miraculous powers are no absolute guarantee of the possession of truth.”

mention tongues...

Spiritual gifts in the church that become divisive are not from God. When anyone speaks for God, a good question must be *why* are they doing this - for self-glory or God's glory?

Next week we will talk more about love and how that ought to be our motivation. Like C.H. Dodd has reminded us: "For loving is not just another action of God, like ruling. Rather, all God's activity is loving activity."

Invitation: