

Sermon 35, Test the Spirits, 1 John 4:1-3

Proposition: A true believer seeks and listens to Christ's Spirit, not to antichrist's!

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, maybe you are a good test-taker and maybe you aren't. Some of us can remember everything we heard in the course when we sit down to take the final exam; others of us can remember everything we heard until we sit down to take the final exam. And so maybe the word "testing" brings up lots of positive memories for you; maybe it brings up lots of terrible memories. Either way, though, the Apostle shares with us this morning one test we absolutely do not want to miss. This is not a test you take, but a test you administer. It is a very simple test; it has only one question, and that is a true-false question. The question is "This is the Holy Spirit: True or False." Of course, in one sense you're administering the test to the spirit and thereby attempting to identify whether it's the Holy Spirit or an unholy spirit. But in another sense, you have to circle one. You have to make the call on whether the spirit you're looking at is true or false. This is radically important because not every spirit, and therefore not every spiritual reality or spiritual experience, is good. In fact, John seems to imply in this passage that there is only one Holy Spirit but that there are *many* evil spirits that would lead you astray. And thus, it is imperative that we as Christians be prepared to test the spirits and that we pay attention to the test results. Ultimately, the reason to test the spirits is that you want to be in touch with Jesus and your Father through their Holy Spirit; you and I want to hear from Jesus, and we don't want to hear from Satan. So get out your test kit.

I. What to do with spirits, v. 1

Some of the commentators skip ahead to the references to "them" in vv. 4-5 and say, "Aha! John mentions 'spirits' but he is actually talking about all-too-human teachers." Yes, John is absolutely talking about human teachers, just as he was in ch. 2 with the antichrists. But that

said, brothers and sisters, we don't want to *limit* this to the human dimension either. John is talking about false prophets and teachers, and much of what he's warning us against is going to be things said and published by human beings like ourselves. But we cannot afford to ignore the underlying spiritual dimension. As C.S. Lewis says about spirits or "macrobes" as he calls them in *That Hideous Strength*, they are the real explanation of that fatal bent which is the main lesson of history. Underneath the natural surface are spiritual realities that have a bigger influence than any of us are prepared to guess.

A. Don't Believe Them All, v. 1a

And so, like John, we are primarily going to use the category of "spirits" rather than the category of "false teachers." And the first point John makes to us, his beloved spiritual children, is that we must not believe every spirit. What does this mean? I don't know about you, but I've never had an angel or demon approach me in a visible form and say "Would you believe that I've been in Heaven and I happen to know that Jesus has a tattoo of His mother covering His back?"

It's never happened. As far as I can tell from my own experience, I have never had an opportunity to believe a spirit because a spirit who was recognizable as such has never told me anything!

What do we make of this? Do we say "John's command is not relevant to us?"

No. We don't.

Instead, we need to recognize that any and every purportedly "spiritual" experience is not self-authenticating. Just because something is spiritual doesn't mean that it's right, good, wholesome, or holy. We are all aware of places and people with tremendous spiritual power, people who have that aura about them. Perhaps you've been to some of the Native American sites here in Wyoming where a certain spiritual feeling lingers. Is that spiritual feeling, is that spiritual person, to be trusted just because he/she/it is spiritual? The answer is "Absolutely not." Don't believe every spirit! Don't believe everything spiritual, or everything paranormal. Don't believe everything that transcends our physical and soulish reality. As John Stott pointed out, in this case *unbelief* is a mark of spiritual maturity. Now, John is not saying "Never believe anything spiritual." What is he saying? "Never believe anything spiritual just because it is spiritual." You may be able to recognize its spirituality. That, my friends, is neither here nor there. The equivalent on the natural plane is believing a philosophy just because it's sophisticated, believing a historian just because he quotes a lot of sources, believing a used-car salesman just because he obviously knows a lot about cars! Brothers and sisters, of course philosophers are sophisticated in their use of reasons, historians sophisticated in their use of sources, car salesmen sophisticated in their use of car jargon! Yet that does not mean that that particular philosopher, historian, or car salesman is honest or correct. Knowing a lot about cars doesn't make you trustworthy; knowing a lot about what the primary sources say doesn't make you a reliable interpreter of them. The highly educated and sophisticated are not trustworthy simply because they are highly educated and sophisticated. Character matters more than knowledge. And so it is with John's statement that we must not believe every spirit. The

character of the spirit, the kind of spirit it is, is far more important than the fact that it's a spirit — just as the kind of human being someone is matters far more than that they are a human being. Those, for instance, who looked for decent treatment at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Army during WWII were deeply disappointed. Of course the Japanese officers were just as human as the Americans, Chinese, and Pacific Islanders they captured. But their treatment of prisoners and subjugated populations was barbaric and brutal in the extreme. Their humanity meant nothing.

B. Test Them, v. 1b

So get this in your head and make it stick: The spirituality of a person, a group, a location, or an experience means nothing. Nothing. I don't care if it's the most spiritual thing that's ever happened to you, if she's the most spiritual girl you've ever met, if that church or temple or meetinghouse was filled with a spiritual power. John looks at all of that stuff and says "So what? You don't know whether it's a good spirit or a bad spirit until you give it the one-question true-false test." You must test the spirits. Just as you shouldn't believe the philosopher, car dealer, or historian without some kind of additional verification, so you shouldn't believe the spirits without additional verification. You must give them a test.

II. Why to doubt and test: False Prophets Have Exited the Church and Entered the World, v. 1c

Now, before we talk about what this test consists of, we need to ask "Why?". For what reason is testing so important? I've already been saying that not all human beings are good. Not all intellectual products are good. And not all spirits are good. Indeed, John gives as the reason to test the spirits this reality: Many false prophets have gone out. This is an intriguing statement. It suggests that the primary way spirits good and bad communicate is through prophets — people who speak on behalf of some spiritual entity from the "beyond" or "other side". Not all of those who claim to bring messages from the spirit world are true prophets. In fact, many of them are false prophets.

The commentators dispute whether we are primarily to think about people within the church exercising their gift of prophecy when we read this. Is John only talking about people who definitely and distinctly wear the label "prophet?" The answer is "No." No, he's not merely talking about those people. Ultimately, as v. 5 indicates, he's talking about every pundit the world takes seriously. He is talking about every "influencer" with a "platform" to whom the world listens. Whether these people claim supernatural heft or not is not the point. Whether they carry a spiritual aura is not the point. Their reception by the world is the point.

Yet, though he names their destination (like the girl who moves to Los Angeles to make it big), he doesn't say anything about their origin. Is this girl from a small town, or is she from New York? Are the false pundits from the church, or from a different sector of the world, or what? From where did they go out? I think the answer has to be "the church." The biggest group of false pundits we need to watch out for, in other words, are people who started in the church but have since found their biggest audience in the world. They left the church and moved into the

world because the stage was bigger and the ticket revenues were better. These people are the classic example of the false spirit.

Kevin Swanson, a Presbyterian pastor in Colorado, wrote a few years ago a book titled *Apostate: The Men Who Destroyed the Christian West*. (See [my review](#).) He profiled a number of big-name folks and argued that because they were born into Christian homes but then walked away from the faith, they are definitely apostates. They left the church, went out into the world, and had a devastating effect. Though few would think of Renee Descartes or Mark Twain as false prophets, Swanson's argument seems to fit perfectly with what the apostle is talking about here in our text. They left the church, went out into the world, and found a reception among the worldly.

Isn't there some other explanation? Couldn't we say that Mark Twain, etc. were honest apostates? John says no. There are two kinds of people as there are two kinds of spirits. Those who believe are saved; those who do not believe are condemned already precisely because they do not believe.

III. What kinds of spirits you'll find, vv. 2-3

And thus John asserts that there are two and only two different spirits to be found. This is not a multiple-choice test. It is a true-false test.

A. True: The Spirit of Christ, v. 2

The true spirit is the Spirit of God, or the Spirit of Christ, or the Holy Spirit. His name is variously given in different places in the Bible, but His character is always the same. He is the true Spirit. He's the one that tells the truth; He's the one you and I need to believe. He comes from God, proceeding from the Father and the Son. He passes the test.

B. False: The spirit of antichrist, v. 3

The other, and indeed the *only* other, kind of spirit, is the spirit of antichrist. Now, this is not some kind of inversion, some kind of equal-and-opposite to the Holy Spirit. Yes, it is an unholy spirit, but it is never called that in the Bible just as Satan is not called the un-God. The spirit of antichrist is a general term for what the rest of the Bible identifies as demons and their leaders, that old serpent who is the Devil and Satan.

These are the only kinds of spirits and spiritual experiences out there. Why does John not mention angels, the good spirits? Probably for the same reason that he does not mention demons. He simply mentions *the* Holy Spirit and *the* Spirit of antichrist, with the understanding that both of them are attended by a host of lesser spirits, angelic and demonic, who carry out the will of the Holy Spirit and the Devil respectively.

Every spiritual experience and spiritual place and spiritual entity falls into one of these two categories. You and I must test the spirits to see which is which. Is it a true spirit that tells the truth from God? Or is it a false spirit that lies to you? How do you know?

IV. How to test spirits, vv. 2-3

Well, says John, I'm so glad you asked. In order to administer this true-false test to spirits, you simply need to listen to what they say and don't say.

A. Listen to what they say, vv. 2-3

First, listen to what they say. Do they exalt Jesus Christ as come in the flesh? Remember, to “confess” Him is not simply to say “Yes, there was a rabbi in the first century named Jesus from the town of Nazareth.” No. To confess means “to say along with.” In other words, the spirits that confess Jesus are the ones who not only say that he was God’s anointed one come in the flesh, but further say that they believe it. To confess something is to positively assert it as true. It is NOT merely to say that some people hold it to be true, or that it is an article of faith in some sects. To confess it is to say “It’s correct.” Any spirit that professes this faith, then, is the Spirit of God.

What about Christian sects? Obviously Mormons will say that they confess Jesus Christ come in the flesh. The bottom line here is that John is not giving the ultimate formula that no lying spirit can ever agree with. The Bible doesn’t do that kind of technical language. Rather, he is giving a statement of the truth that, when interpreted along with what the rest of the Bible says, is a comprehensive and accurate account of how to recognize the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes people Christians; He teaches us to confess our faith in Jesus as the one who came from God as His Anointed One in the flesh.

B. Listen to what they don’t say, v. 3

But you and I also need to notice what these spirits don’t say. They don’t say anything about Jesus. They don’t confess Him. They don’t assert their belief in Him. Instead, they give Him the silent treatment. Lying spirits are about anything and everything except Jesus! Again, we want to know — what about false doctrines? What about corruptions of who Jesus is? That’s not about the real Jesus. Those attacks, those misrepresentations, are presenting a different Savior and a different gospel. What we need to do is listen for whether they confess Jesus as God’s Anointed in the flesh. If they don’t, don’t listen. They are false, deluded, lying spirits.

So how do you evaluate the spiritual world? By what it says about Jesus. If it doesn’t say anything about Him, reject it. It’s from the lying spirit.

Does this seem harsh or mean? It’s accurate. Spiritual systems that leave Jesus out are, of course, highly spiritual. John isn’t knocking their spirituality and neither should you. But though they are spiritual, they are not accurate. Though they are spiritual, they are false. Don’t believe them. Don’t get involved in them. The only spiritual experiences you and I should be seeking are ones with the Holy Spirit of God. He is true. He passes the test.

So when you find something purportedly spiritual, listen to what it does and doesn’t say about Jesus. When it insists on the Biblical truth that Jesus is God’s Son, Anointed to saved the world, believe it. Believe that Spirit, for it is the Holy Spirit. Amen.