

Testing the Spirits

1 John 4:1-6

September 26, 2010

We have been making our way through John's first letter to his churches. We have already seen that one of his chief concerns is the false teachers that were already starting to find their way into the church. He was trying to nip in the bud a group of false teachings that would cripple the church if allowed to grow. John wanted the people to be faithful to the truth of the gospel and to reject anything that would pull them from it. It is a lesson we would do well to learn as well.

In this short letter, John has already called the readers, "beloved," three times, and "little children" five times. As we saw last week, "beloved" denotes a relationship in which you care more for the needs of the other than you do your own. It is a sacrificial love that gives of oneself for the benefit of the other. The term "little children" refers to young children who are growing and learning, but not yet able to take care of themselves. They still need guidance and help. As one of the first Apostles, John had been a follower of Jesus longer than most other people alive. He had spent more time in the Lord's presence than anyone else. In calling the people in the church "little children" he wasn't insulting them or looking down on them. He was pointing to their spiritual situation and his position as one able to teach them and who wanted to do so.

John **loves** and cares for those to whom he writes. He is not writing this to manipulate them into doing something for him that will bring harm to them. John

wrote this letter to steer churches from things that will cause problems for them and pull them the wrong way.

Our text begins with John using the term "beloved" a fourth time. What he is about to write comes out of love and desire to see them live faithful lives. John wrote, "*Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.*" (v.1) The first question that cries out to be answered here is, "What does John mean by these 'spirits'?" Is he talking about the false prophets again, or something else?

Most ancient religions had prophets. They were not unique to Judaism or Christianity. We know from the Old Testament scriptures that there were whole schools of prophecy for one god or another. We remember Elijah on mount Carmel against 450 prophets of Baal. We remember Jeremiah prophesying boldly in spite of the fact that hundreds of other prophets disagreed with what he said. We also remember Peter's teaching about true prophecy that, "*For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*" (2 Peter 1:21)

John's point is that **people** who claim to speak for God can be motivated and driven by many different things. Our own hearts can drive us to say things that aren't true or even to put words in God's mouth. Also, just as the Holy Spirit can speak to us, evil spirits can speak. For those who are not firmly grounded in God's word and used to listening to the Holy Spirit, it can even be hard to tell the difference. These people can find themselves carried off by thoughts and ideas that are evil

in nature, and they can try to convince others of the same things, because they are not filled with the truth.

There are many false prophets in the world, and people are false prophets for different reasons. The end result is the same, however. Whether they speak their own mind and out of selfish reasons, or they speak the mind of Satan and his demons, these people, who claim to speak for God but don't, bring **division** into the church and lead God's people away from faithfulness to Him. Whenever anyone would seek to point us in a direction, especially if they claim to speak for God, we must test which spirit motivates them in order to discern if it is God speaking to us or if they are a false prophet.

Thank God John gives us a test by which we can recognize them. John's test is geared toward the breed of false prophets the church faced in her first three centuries. The understanding many people at the time was that the physical world was evil and opposed to God. If matter, by its very nature, was evil then there was no incarnation because the holy God would not take on and contaminate Himself with it. This meant, according to them, that Jesus either did not have a body, but was a ghost, or that Jesus wasn't God the Son, but just a man. They either denied that Jesus is human, or that He is God. Either way, it was a denial of what the early church knew to be true about Jesus and of what the Apostles taught. So, for John's first century readers, this was the test, *"Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God."* (v.2,3) As with most other tests in the church, the

question comes down to this, "What have they done with Jesus?"

When people go wrong and start getting off into unhelpful directions, it is usually because they have denied something important about Jesus. This is where just about every group that has moved away from Christianity has gone wrong. The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints both deny that Jesus was born divine. The former say He was adopted and given the Christ spirit at His baptism. The latter says He was a man just like us and so we can become gods, just like Him. Both of these positions deny the truth about Jesus, God the Son, coming in the flesh, to which the church has held from the beginning. This denial marks those who teach these things as false prophets, no matter how nice they are when they knock on your door.

Going further, John points out that these denials of the truth about Jesus come from the spirit of the antichrist we talked about a few weeks ago. John says it is already in the world. This does not mean that John believed the Great Tribulation was upon them. It does mean that John knew the Antichrist's influence, following Satan's direction and having his authority, has always been felt in the world, and has always been opposed to what God is doing. The Antichrist may not have come yet, but his spirit is already wreaking havoc in the world and seeking to destroy the church.

Against this onslaught, John has words of encouragement and comfort for us. *"You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the*

world.” (v.4) Here is one of the greatest promises in all of scripture! While we need to be aware of false teachers and on our guard against them, we do not have to fear them or the spirits which drive them! John says we have already overcome them. It is God who has saved us. It is God who will guard us. It is God who will keep us until the end. He is the author and finisher of our faith. He is the Almighty who holds us such that nothing can snatch us out of His hand! As powerful as the world and it’s ways seem to be, as tight a grip as they get on us sometimes, God is more powerful still. He has the strength to rescue us. He has the power to redeem us from this fallen and corrupt generation. All we have to do is acknowledge Him for who he really is and submit our wills to His. His promises are sure. He has given us the strength we need in the Holy Spirit to live faithful lives for Him. Why do we insist on trying keep on living in our own strength? We need to stay filled with God’s **word** and His Spirit in order to live out of His strength.

If a person confesses who Jesus really is, if we not only say that Jesus was sent by God, but if we acknowledge that truth by giving our lives to Him, then there is nothing that can destroy us, no teaching that can ruin us, and no spirit that can pull us away from Him. We may be seduced away for a time. Our sinful natures, still alive within us, may hear words they like to hear and may pull us away briefly from the path God would have us walk, but God will win in the end. If we live lives in keeping with our profession of faith in Jesus Christ, then there is no power in the universe that can pull us forever away from Him.

John next gives us the other side of the positive promise that God is greater than the world. Speaking of the false prophets, John wrote, *“They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.”* (v.5) The false prophets, the people given over to the spirit of the antichrists, are from the world, speak from the world’s viewpoint, and the world listens to them.

Note it is the world that listens to them, not the **church**. Those who speak from the world’s point of view ought to have no input on what we believe or what we do. Whenever we hear a teaching or a suggestion we must weigh it against the scripture and the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and judge whether it comes from God or if it has a worldly origin. We must ask if it builds up the church or weakens it. If it comes from a point of view that is not encouraged in the scripture, if it goes against the commands of Christ, if it is not in keeping with faith, love for one another, and righteousness, then we must reject it. It is from the world and will only lead us the wrong way.

Again, John gives us the opposite side and encourages us with this word, *“We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.”* (v.6) Over and against those who teach with missionary zeal their false doctrines in the world, and in the church, stand the true prophets of God who bear the message of salvation and faithfulness to God. It is not only the professions of the mouth that show which **spirit** drives a

person, it is also their response to the message of the church.

John, the other Apostles, and the leaders they trained all held to the same truths both taught by Jesus and demonstrated in His life. These men were from God and shared the truth. They taught it in the churches. They wrote it in letters. Finally, they wrote it in the gospels as they recorded the life and teaching of Jesus Christ so that future generations might have a correct and definitive record. Whoever knows God will listen to these teachings, and will listen to the church as she shares and applies them. If someone refuses to heed the teaching of the Apostles in the scripture, or to heed the church as she teaches those truths and seeks to live them out, then we know that person is not from **God**. John says this is how we know who is influenced by the Holy Spirit and who comes to us from a spirit of falsehood.

We see in this passage why it is so essential that we hold to the truth of God. If we do not hold fast to the scriptures and the Lordship of Jesus we will easily be led astray and away from the only source of life and strength we have. God will hold fast those who are His, but how awful to have to look back over our lives and see time wasted following the world when we could have been obedient to God and building His kingdom.

Next week, John will give us another test, and a way of living for those who pass the test and show themselves as belonging to God.