

Testing The Spirits

1 John 4:1-6

With Study Questions

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I. Don't Believe It

“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” (1 John 4:1).

The Sentiment of Our Hearts

I visited a church recently where the worship leader, while sitting at the piano, made what I believe to be a very accurate statement about human nature. He said (something to the effect) “Our hearts are sinful.” Not ten minutes had elapsed when he said something I thought to be very inconsistent with his prior comment. He said (something to the effect) “We can know if a song is anointed of God by whether or not that author of the song captures the sentiment of our hearts.” So the question must be asked, “If our hearts are sinful, how can they determine whether or not something is anointed?” And “How many people in the congregation must the song resonate with before it can be considered anointed?” Clearly, this is a very dangerous method of determining what is of God and what isn't?

A Written Exam For Invisible Spirits?

In light of the passage before us, how does one test the spirits? Spirits are kind of ethereal things. It doesn't seem like we can put them under the same types of tests that we put other things. You can't give them a written exam or put a stopwatch or tape measure to them. By definition a spirit is invisible. You can't see it hear it or feel it. And even if you could feel it, how would you know it was a spirit and not indigestion?

False Spirits Already in the World

Of course John couldn't be giving us an exhortation that's impossible to obey. John seems very concerned for a church that is already dealing with false or lying spirits of a sort. I might point out that we see in the very infancy of the church, so far from it being pure, it being bombarded with false spirits (there is a warning here to recognize that mere historicity in the church does not necessarily equal biblical accuracy.)

Jumping from the Invisible to the Visible

So how do we know the lying spirits from the true spirits? Is it a gut feel? Is it a subtle nuance? Is it the presence of spiritual gifts, good deeds or even love? For surely a Christian church should produce all these things. But on the other hand, the presence of a good gut feel or a comforting nuance, even a great gift like love, could be present, to some extent, among pagans and heretics. So how do we make the jump from the invisible (indiscernible) spirit to the observable (or at least knowable) and the testable spirit? For this must be necessary to obey the exhortation.

Hints in the Verse

It seems that John gives us a hint right in the verse. What does John say we are to avoid regarding certain spirits? We are to avoid believing them. To believe something means you think it to be true. So these false spirits are putting forth some sort of doctrine they want people to believe.

John gives another hint in the verse. Who does John equate with the spirit that is not to be believed? False prophets. So the spirit which Christians are to avoid believing manifest themselves through false prophets. Now it becomes a very observable and discernible thing. A lying spirit puts forth a false message.

This seems to be the concern of Paul as well as John. Examine Paul's fear for the church after he had sought to teach them a full and accurate doctrine.

“Therefore I testify to you this day that I *am* innocent of the blood of all *men*.²⁷ “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.²⁸ “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.²⁹ “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.³⁰ “Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:26-30).

Paul's fear was that perverse things (false teachings) would invade the church. We see this also in his epistle to Timothy. Notice again how Paul equates deceiving spirits with false doctrine.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons,² speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their

own conscience seared with a hot iron, ³ forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Timothy 4:1-3)

How important is sound doctrine? Read John’s words in his next epistle.

“Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 1:7)

Causing Division

Those who harp on sound doctrine will often be accused of divisiveness. The Apostle Paul saw it otherwise.

“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. ¹⁸ For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple” (Romans 16:17,18)

According to Paul, who is causing the division? Not those who promote sound doctrine, but those contrary to sound doctrine.

I remember being openly criticized, by a man in the ministry, for emphasizing doctrine. I met with him and sought to convey to him my understanding of my call as a pastor/elder. I asked him to take a look at 1 Timothy 5:17 which reads,

“Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (1 Timothy 5:17).

I hoped this would help him understand why I thought it to be important. He mockingly said, “Well I’ve got a verse for you.” At first I thought he really did and I was interested to read it. I later realized he was simply mocking me. Everybody has a doctrine. And it will be either Christian or antichristian.

II. The Specific Doctrine—Docetism and Gnosticism

John seemed to have a specific doctrine in mind as he penned this letter. We learn of the issue in verses two and three.

By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ 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” (1 John 4:2,3).

Docetism

The issue before John seemed to be whether or not Jesus actually came in the flesh. This issue, commonly referred to as docetism, denied the incarnation. They would hold that Jesus was not both God and man. His sufferings were more imaginary than real. This was very Gnostic and had, contained in it, a general theme that things physical were inherently evil. John dealt with this quite extensively. He does so in these two verses but also at the beginning of the epistle where he asserts,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life” (1 John 1:1).

John also starts his gospel with a similar assertion.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

John will also address this in his next epistle.

“For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist” (2 John 1:7)

Gnostics Make No Jump

Although I do not intend to pursue the issues of docetism or Gnosticism at this juncture, (although we must acknowledge the horrendous implications of what happens to real men and women in the real world if Jesus didn't really live and die and resurrect in the flesh—our faith would be a fantasy and we would be, as Paul says, to be pitied) but perhaps you can begin to see how the very verses we are presently studying can easily be twisted by Gnostics who don't think it is necessary to make the jump from the invisible (or unknowable) to the

discernible and knowable. A Gnostic can ostensibly test a spirit through some kind of invisible and indiscernible or unexplainable method.

I Don't Know

I remember having a conversation with a Gnostic who had given me what he believed to be information from God. I asked him how he got the information—how did God convey this to him? With a smug and very mysterious disposition he simply answered, “I don't know.” I am going to let your imagination take you to the heresies this method of Christianity can produce.

The Antichrist

Another issue that I am not going to pursue in detail here is the issue of the antichrist. Suffice it to say that there are many antichrists (1 John 2:18). And that it seems to be the purpose of antichrist to distort sound Christian doctrine, namely to deny that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22) and to deny that Jesus came in the flesh (the verse before us as well as 2 John 1:7.)

What's Your Doctrine?

As stated earlier, everybody has a doctrine. It will either be Christian or antichristian. Of course, the reality for all of us is that our doctrine is moving in a Christian direction or in an antichristian direction. So what direction is your doctrine moving and how can you tell? This is critically important for your doctrine is tell-tale as to whether you are of God or of the world. John continues

III. Who Hears Whom?

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. ⁵ They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them” (1 John 4:4,5).

Overcomers

How often we hear this verse (1 John 4:4) quoted and how seldom have we examined the context, which is overcoming false teaching. We have overcome “them.” Who is “them” but the false teachers? And how is it we overcome them but because of the Spirit of God which abides in us? The meaning of verse four seems to be something like this, **“Children of God have overcome the teaching of the false prophets because when the Spirit of God is in them, it is a greater influence than the power of worldly doctrines.”** In

other words, there is a reason why a Christian will reject false teaching. It is due to the presence of the Spirit of God in their lives—it is because they are the elect. Hear the words of Jesus.

“He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God” (John 8:47).

We see that those who hear (or adhere) to the words of Jesus indicate, by doing so, that they are His. We also see the response of the ungodly—they don’t hear because they are not of God.

This, among other reasons, is why we should never seek to tamper with the pure message of the gospel. Those who are of God will hear God. Those who are not of God won’t. But we must address one final question. What is the objective standard by which we can determine a true spirit.

IV. An Objective Standard

“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” (1 John 4:6).

So one question remains. How do we know the true teaching which comes from the true spirit? John finishes this section with no uncertainty. He states, **“He who knows God hears us.”** And “us” isn’t just anyone, but John’s teaching with apostolic authority. Paul captures the same thought in 1 Corinthians.

“If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 14:37).

Even though Paul knew he was a sinner, he also knew he was an apostle. And as an apostle, he was to be regarded as speaking the word of God. Peter makes a similar assertion.

“Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in *both of* which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), ² that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior” (2 Peter 3:1,2).

As does Jude.

“But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jude 17).

The Apostle Paul declared that the foundation of our faith is the apostles and the prophets, i. e., the word of God. If you want to test spirits, you must know the word of God. It is not a nuance, a gut feel, or something mysterious and mystical. If one is of God, they will heed the words of Jesus and His apostles.

Questions for Study

1. How is a spirit revealed in such a way that we can test it?
2. How accurate are our hearts when it comes to testing spirits?
3. What are we to avoid regarding false spirits?
4. What was Paul's fear in terms of the invasion of the church?
5. Is focus on doctrine divisive? If so, is that bad?
6. According to Paul, who causes divisions when it comes to doctrine (Romans 16:17,18)?
7. Discuss docetism and Gnosticism.
8. What does the antichrist promote?
9. Who does verse four indicate Christians overcome?
10. In what respect do Christians overcome?
11. Why are Christians capable of overcoming?
12. How do we know a true spirit?
13. What is the foundation of the Christian faith (Eph. 2:20)?