

1 John 4:1-6
(Deuteronomy 18:15-22; Matthew 7:15-20)
“Test the Spirits”

Introduction

We live in a chamber of noise and are blasted with messages: watch this, desire this, buy this, believe this, do this. Unless we are intentionally reflective and discerning, we will find ourselves shaped, molded and moved into action by messages chosen by others. How are we to discern whether a carefully crafted, compellingly presented, message is true or false, wise or foolish, helpful or destructive?

John’s hearers faced the same problem in their day. Even without TVs, computers, smart phones and 24/7 news, a host of new religions and philosophies called them to believe mutually exclusive messages. The particular form of what is now called Gnosticism that John was addressing need not concern us. But the advice he gave to Christians about discerning which messages are from God’s Spirit and which are “antichrist” (meaning messages reflective of the spirit of this world in opposition to God and his Christ), is as needed today as it was when John wrote this letter.

John had already begun to address this back in chapter two, where he wrote that any teacher who denies that Jesus is the Christ is in effect also denying the Father who sent the Son into the world to redeem us, and that person is (in John’s language) “antichrist.” Unfortunately, popular studies of apocalyptic literature have made “antichrist” a particular bogeyman whose identity is matter of speculation, whereas John used the term in its basic meaning as describing anyone or any message opposed to the gospel of Christ. Now in the verses before us, he adds two more tests for Christians to apply to those who claim to teach the truth about God. John writes, “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. By this you know the Spirit of God” (4:1-2).

It is important that we put these tests in the light of other warnings given in Scripture about false teachers. For example, in our first Scripture lesson this morning, we heard Moses warning against those who claim to be prophets but whose predictions do not come true. Don’t fear them, he counsels, because they are false prophets. Every self-professed prophet that I have ever personally known or encountered has failed Moses’ test. Every one has made predictions that did not come true. And, in our second lesson, we heard Jesus warn against false teachers by pointing to their lives: if their lives do not show the marks of God’s grace, if they are not living right, then don’t listen to them.

Note that this does *not* mean that people who reject Christ have nothing to teach us. They may be excellent doctors or lawyers or teachers or scientists or carpenters or musicians or writers or artists or neighbors or friends. But they cannot teach us

about the things of God, because their eyes are still blind to spiritual truth. They are not the ones to teach us the meaning of life or the way to live a life that is rich and full and that partakes even now of eternity.

Body

1. We recognize God's Spirit in the speaker's message (4:2-3).

The message John has in mind is a message concerning who God is, who Jesus is, and how one can be reconciled to God. If the message presents Jesus as God's Anointed (which in Hebrew is "Messiah" and in Greek is "Christ"), the One through whom God is reconciling the world to himself, then the message is from God. *That does not mean that everything the speaker says is biblically, theologically, historically or factually accurate.* It simply means that the teacher is seeking to be faithful to the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, and so the message should be taken seriously as coming from a brother or sister in Christ. If, on the other hand, the speaker denies that Jesus is God's Anointed, saying perhaps that he was a good teacher, or a compassionate healer, or a peasant revolutionary, but not the Son of God come to save a lost humanity, then that speaker is against the gospel of Christ

Now this antichrist message comes at us frequently in both subtle and blatant ways. It may be a pastor or seminary professor who has drunk too deeply of the spirit of the age and who presents Jesus as a wonderfully compelling person, perhaps the best who ever lived, and who deserves to be remembered and revered in these wonderfully evocative myths and legends about him, and in the liturgies and sacraments that call us to seek to emulate his life. But we are surely too sophisticated to believe that any of this is historically true, except in a poetic or metaphorical sense. Or it may be as crass as a late night comic who uses Jesus as a punch line to a funny story. It may be someone you like very much and want to know better who views religion with contempt. But it comes with increasing frequency in the post-Christian cultures of the west.

2. We also recognize God's Spirit in the response of the listeners (4:4-6).

John then turns, surprisingly, I think, to look at those who are listening to what is being taught and their response to the message. He speaks of three different groups, and says that those who are listening and receiving the message also tell us something about whether the message is true or false, whether it is from God or from the world.

First, he focuses on the Christians to whom he wrote the letter, his original readers, and writes, "Little children, you are from God and have overcome

them [“them” being the false teachers], for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (4:4). In other words, you have not embraced the false teachers or their message. You have the Spirit of God in you, and he is leading you to know and understand the truth about Jesus. So, John’s point is that we should note those who are spiritually mature, those who have walked a while in the power of the Spirit and the truth of the gospel, and if they all seem to be rejecting a particular message or suspecting a particular teacher of not teaching the truth of Christ, that should at least raise a significant red flag, and we should be very skeptical of such teachers and their message.

How often we would have been saved time in the wilderness if we had simply noted the things received by the wise, the paths walked by the good and just. The emphasis today – almost a celebration – of the continuing sinfulness of Christians is something unknown to the Scripture. No, we never get it perfectly right and, no, we never have cause for spiritual pride, but how often in Scripture are we told that God delighted in certain people because they were living righteous lives and delighted in his ways. They were not yet perfect, but they were on pilgrimage with him, embracing his truth, delighting in his ways, and so he delighted in them. We should note those who delight in the ways of the Lord and take them seriously when they warn us against certain teachers and certain teachings.

Then he turns to the false teachers: “They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world and the world listens to them” (4:5). Your spiritual life will not be set right by those who are celebrated by a world that rejects the gospel of Christ. They may have much to teach you about history and literature and math and science. They may save your life in surgery or defend you brilliantly in court. But when it comes to the deepest matters of the heart, when it involves meaning and what lies behind all this in which we live and move and have our being, they are clueless, and the best of them are honest enough to say so. So if you hear a spiritual teacher or guru or ethicist, celebrated by the culture, but denying the very foundations of being and goodness, of justice and truth, of beauty and joy, then you should listen carefully and skeptically, ready to reject whatever message rejects the gospel of Christ.

Finally, John turns to the apostle band of which he was a member, and writes, “We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever does not know God does not listen to us” (4:6). This statement would sound unbelievably arrogant if we did not know the story of John and the apostles, of their pride and unbelief, their self-professed cowardice the night of his arrest, as they scrambled to distance themselves from Jesus, and their deep repentance when, after the resurrection, he came to them and forgave them. This story they had told to all who would listen, a story that humbled them and exalted Jesus, a story that pointed to their failure and sin and to God’s amazing grace. Their commission was from the risen Christ, their power from the Spirit

poured out at Pentecost. They were no longer what they had been before the Lord gave them his Spirit and commissioned them to take his life and ministry to the world. Thus John could speak as he does here.

Conclusion

What of you, this hot summer morning? What messages are you allowing to mold and shape your soul? What messages enter your head and heart through the books you read, the movies you enjoy, the music that makes the sound track of your life? How much do you counterbalance those messages with the message of God's Word? Do you find a quiet place each day to draw aside and seek the Lord? Do you listen daily to his Word and seek the direction of his Spirit? Do you really believe that his ways lead to life and joy and peace, or do you simply seek to add God to your life in case these things are true?

Jesus has come to transform your life, to give you access even now to the Kingdom of God, to a growing intimacy with the living God, to the reality of eternal life even now, to sins forgiven, shame removed, and a new power to begin to learn to live and love as Jesus did, to reconciled relationships, to new desires and dreams, to a life of eternal significance. Why would you want to go on living as you have, apart from the grace of God? Why would you let a broken world shape your hopes and dreams?

“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. By this you know the Spirit of God” (4:1-2).

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