**Test the Spirits**

Based on [1 John 4](https://biblia.com/books/esv/1Jn4)

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Lenten Midweek 4

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First John is a profound and richly composed letter written by John the apostle. He writes, not just as a teacher, or as a leader of the church. **John writes and speaks to the church as a loving Father speaks to children.** He even calls them “my little children” and encourages them toward maturity in faith. He instructs them in how faithful children of God walk or “live” in the world. Chapter 4 of this letter begins by giving us to consider what it means to walk in the Spirit of God, also called the Spirit of Truth.

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: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 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.”**

Walking in the Spirit--walking in the truth--requires testing and discernment. There are many spirits in the world. There are angels and there are devils. Every human being has his own spirit. Over them all there there is the Holy Spirit and there is the Spirit of the Antichrist. These spirits testify to things to move your heart and direct you.

Your own spirit may at times tell you that God hates you, that He knows your sin. There is no excuse for you and He will not forgive. Your heart may tell you this but the Spirit of God is greater than your heart. When your spirit says you are condemned; The Spirit of God says, “**I forgive you all your sins.**” Always test the spirit--that is, the *message* that comes from the spirit--to see if it is from God. If your spirit testifies against God’s forgiveness in Christ, you know it is not speaking from God and don’t listen to it; don’t live by it. Listen instead to the spirit from God.

Every Spirit that confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. This does not mean you trust the messenger, but the message. Paul says in Galatians, “**If we or an angel from heaven preaches you a gospel (a message) contrary to the one you the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.**” Even an angel from heaven, if he brings you a message different from the Word of God that has already been revealed, it is not from God, but a different spirit.

And on the other hand, If the devil himself brings the message that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, that message is from God and you should believe it, not because of the devil but because of God. **That does not mean that if a spirit says Jesus is come in the flesh, that you can trust everything else that spirit says.** You always test the spirit. Sometimes our own spirit testifies with God, in that case listen. Other times our own spirit, still tainted with sin, testifies against God, when that happens don’t listen to it.

John writes here that there are two Spirits that inform all other spirits. **The Spirit of God and the spirit of antichrist; the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.** There is no middle ground, no third spiritual source of teaching. There is sound doctrine and there is false doctrine; if the Spirit speaks sound doctrine it is from God and meant for God’s children. If the spirit speaks false doctrine it is from the antichrist and is for the world’s children.

In Matthew Chapter 16, Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and is commended by Jesus for it. Jesus said to Peter, “**Blessed are you. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven**.” Peter confessed the truth about Jesus, that the man standing before him in the flesh is the son of God and the Christ. And Jesus says, that knowledge and that confession of the truth came not from the world, from God, the Father in heaven.

One might conclude that, since Peter confessed true teaching from God at one point, all words that come from him will be trustworthy and from the Spirit of truth. However, only a few verses later in very the same chapter, Jesus says more of himself. He said to his disciples that he “**must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised**.” When he said this, Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘**Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.**’ But Jesus turned and said to Peter, “**Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.**”

Just because Peter confessed rightly at one point, does not mean he is his spirit is infallible. In Peter’s false confession against what the Christ must do, his spirit was speaking according to a different spirit, the spirit of antichrist. Jesus, responding to Peter says, “**Get behind me Satan**.” **Even though Peter had just confessed the truth about Jesus coming in the flesh moments before, Satan, the evil spirit, was the source of Peter’s words.** Peter should have tested the spirit. He should have been discerning. After all, the teaching of Jesus’ death and resurrection came from Jesus own lips. The only spirit that would contradict Jesus words, especially in his own presence is anti-christ, against Christ, and from Satan, the father of lies himself.

Be mindful of the existence of spirits, and do not fail to discern them and rebuke false spirits. There is a famous example in the history of this in our own Lutheran Church. At the Marburg Colloquy October 1, 1529, there was a chance for all protestant Christianity to walk together in unity against the Pope and Roman Catholic abuses of doctrine. Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, representatives of different churches, agreed on 14 of the 15 articles of faith. They disagreed only on one, the teaching Lord’s Supper. Luther argued it is Jesus true body and blood, Zwingli argued the bread and wine are mere symbols. Zwingli was content to agree to disagree, but Luther refused fellowship concluding with the words “**Your spirit and our spirit cannot go together. Indeed, it is quite obvious that we do not have the same Spirit**.”

Luther was right to go against the spirit that says we can agree to disagree about the words of Christ, “This is my body” “This is my blood”, and still commune together. It is not the Spirit of God that says no to Jesus plain words. The spirit that would deny that the bread is Jesus body, the cup his blood is the spirit of the antichrist. Christ said “this is my body” and “this is my blood” and His spirit is from God. The spirit that denies the plain words of Christ is anti-Christ, a different spirit and must be rebuked and condemned.

John continues, “**Little children, you are from God and have [the false spirits], for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world [antichrist].”** The Spirit who is in you is the Holy Spirit, who was poured out upon you in Baptism. This is why you are called saints of God…holy people. This is why you are called children of God, through the inheritance of the Spirit of truth.

You can see what is of God and what is of the world, not because he speaks to you directly, but because His Spirit causes you to believe the word of God, the commands of Christ, the word of life that you have heard and believed. And you have this sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. As the scriptures say, “**For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart**.”

And the intention of your heart is love, that issues from a pure heart. **Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.** If anyone says, “I love God”, and hates his brother, he is a liar, because the Holy Spirit makes the love of God known to us in that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another we discern the spirit of God. He abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

And on account of this love we have for the brothers--which is how we love God--we have confidence for the day of judgment. Who can bear to stand before a God who he has hated? **But we love the brothers because God has first loved us.**  And to know the love of the Father whom we have not seen, that is the faith by which we are saved, *through* Christ and *in* the Spirit of God, who is our guarantee of eternal life, and who—while we still walk in the world--guides us in all truth.