

Test the Spirits

Introduction

I was in somewhat of a bad mood this week, work was overwhelming and things were not going smoothly. I am sure you have had a week like that. Here I was studying 1st John chapter 4 concerning the testing of the spirits and was in the midst of my own spiritual warfare. We give praise to God for He gives us two powerful weapons for spiritual battle - prayer and His Word. As one observes what is going on in the world, at large, and experiences what the world injects into our own lives, it is easy to let it get to you. But we have hope! God have given us His Spirit to live within our soul and there simply is not enough room in there for an evil spirit of the world – praise be to God! Prayer and study of God’s Word changed my bad mood into thankfulness that I am a child of God. Growing up in false doctrine and belief systems I am so appreciative the Bible proves itself to be ever true and that it does not change with the culture and fads of mankind. It is the anchor to hold one steadfast in the currents of this ever-changing world. My dad wanted his boys to be tough and he always said, big boys don’t cry, but I remember how my mom told me that a good cry washes out the soul, it sweeps away the dirt that has collected there and the soul is cleaned and ready for the thoughts of God to take root. Praise God for cleansing tears.

One of the greatest weapons of Satan is lies; lies built upon a grain of truth and half-truth lies that appeals to our egos. Satan has used this method effectively

since the beginning. “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say, “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?”’ ” A lie of half-truth, God did not say any tree. Back in verse 17 of chapter 2, God told Adam only, for Eve was not created yet, “The tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” So God had not said this to Eve directly and He was speaking of sudden spiritual death and mortal life that ended in physical death as well. Now in Genesis chapter 3, verse 4 the lie continues, “But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it (*the tree of knowledge of good and evil*) your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ ” (Genesis 3:1, 4-5) Satan knew Adam and Eve would not physically die, until years later, but they would die spiritually and be separated from God. All people are spiritually immortal, be it the spiritually dead to Satan and hell or the spiritually alive in God to heaven. It also, appears at this point Adam and Eve may not have possessed the weapon of prayer and surely not the written Word of God. Yes, there were in the physical presence of God, but we could also ask, did the Spirit of God dwell within their souls to guide them? Satan took advantage of their weakness and egos. Today it is the same. We are not physically in the presence of God, but we do live in His spiritual presence by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. So how do we learn from the failure of Adam and Eve and know how to test the spirits to determine if they are of God or of the world, which is to say, if a spirit is of the world it is of Satan?

Test of Indwelling

The process to find the answer begins by reading the first three verses of 1st John chapter 4, “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. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and 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 already.”

Now look at verse 2 again, “By this you know the Spirit of God.” John is saying there is a test to determine if a spirit is of God. A test by which you can know if someone is being led by the Holy Spirit or by some other spirit. Is the person really of God and indwelt by the Spirit, or is the person of the world and misled by the spirit of this age? How can you and I tell? What is the test?

John gives us the answer as verse 2 continues, “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” It is God the Holy Spirit dwelling within you, in your soul, that testifies to the reality of God in your life. It is the Holy Spirit that causes you to know and live the truth of Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” (Romans 10:9-10) A genuine confession of Jesus as the Christ and the Lord of your soul is a sure sign of the Holy Spirit in your life.

Both the apostles John and Paul use the word “confess”, but does confess mean? Understanding the meaning of “confess” creates a bit of a problem for us. We

know that there are people who can say true things about Jesus, but who are, in fact, **not** born of God or indwelt by the Holy Spirit. If we paid someone enough money, some people would be willing to make any confession we wanted here in front of the whole church, and it would be no evidence at all of that person belonging to God. Jesus made it clear, “**Not everyone who says to Jesus ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.**” ²² **On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’** ²³ **And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”** (Matthew 7:21-23) In other words, simply saying right things about Jesus is no sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence.

So what does John mean when he says in verse 2 that “**every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God?**” The answer must lie in what John means by the word “**confess.**”

Test of Words

In chapter 1 John writes, “**If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**” (1 John 1:9) What does confess mean here? I can tell it does not mean simply mouthing the words, “I know I am a sinner or Jesus is the Christ.” The Apostle Mark records, “**Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God.’**” (Mark 3:11) Even evil spirits know who Jesus is. The peace of Christ comes only to those who believe in Him. Without this peace forgiveness is elusive.

We all know that forgiveness and reconciliation does not happen when the words

of an apology are superficial and insincere. If I say to one of my children, "Tell your sister you're sorry," and she says begrudgingly, "I'm sorry," it does not achieve repentance or reconciliation. The confession must be sincere. It must come from the heart. It must be more than mere words. There has to be a changed nature corresponding to the offense committed. Real regret. Real contrition. Real repentance. Then forgiveness and reconciliation can happen.

So when John says in chapter 4, verse 2 that the evidence of divine spiritual reality is the "confession" that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, he probably does not mean that the mere words are enough evidence. Just because people can say that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is no sure sign that they are of God. There has to be change, a person must become something they have not been. People before Christ are spiritually dead. God comes and changes them; He makes their souls come alive by His Spirit. One cannot make this change by their own power, it can only happen by the power of God. Satan wants people to think they are saved and have no need for God's Spirit or His Word, but without these everything is just an illusion of true change and true salvation.

Look at the millions of people in the Mormon Church that believe they are saved, but they believe in a false Christ, a Christ that is not of the Bible and of God, but a Christ invented by the mind of a man. Jesus warned His followers before His crucifixion that after He rose from the dead and returned to God the Father that there would be false Christs. Both Matthew and Mark recorded Jesus saying, "And then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is! do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.'" (Mark 13:21-22 and *Matthew 24:24-*

25) Even some of those who appear to be the “elect”, those chosen by God and belonging to His church are not. There are people in churches all over the world who are there for reasons other than Christ. There are many churches that have walked away from the true scripture, they have changed God’s Bible into man’s bible. Jesus was clear that false christs and false prophets give false hope and false salvation and these lead to the pit of hell.

Test of Heart

John probably means that the sincere, genuine confession of Christ is evidence of the Spirit's work. If there is a change of heart corresponding to the tremendous truth that the Son of God has come in the flesh, then the confession is evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, just because someone can speak doctrinal words, recite scripture, no matter how true, does not prove anything about the spirit or person behind them. Unless the words come with reverence and heartfelt conviction and submission to Christ - the words are of no value.

I asked my friend and brother, a former Muslim and now a Pakistani Pastor, if he was able to make any spiritual impact on people he spoke to. He said that the tribal people were open to his testimony, but that most of the devout Muslims even though they might even agree with him, for he knew the Quran well and used it to show the Bible is the true Book of God, that he created fear in them. They agreed to some small thing in order to get him to leave. They even liked the insurance of someone praying for them and their religion did not matter, so long, as it was not Jewish. Many would quickly agree to something in order to get him to leave them alone. So what should we make of such agreements? If a person agrees or confesses out of ignorance or fear or spiritual oppression what is the

validity? If someone confesses out of peer pressure or if someone confessed in order to get something or to get someone to back off, do such confessions prove that the person is of God, or that the spirit with which they speak is the Spirit of God? Muslims fear the Jinn or evil spirits more than the true Spirit of God, because they do not understand the concept of God having a Spirit that He gives to His people. God's true children not only submit to Him but by His Spirit they have a relationship with Him. One way to know if a confession is of a believer would be to watch as see if there comes Fruit of the Spirit. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." (Romans 10:9-10) True belief changes the heart and if the heart is changed the Fruit of the Spirit comes forth like an overflowing fountain. James spoke of the power of truth, "Does a fountain send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor *can* salt water produce fresh." (James 3:11-12) Salt water cannot produce fresh water of truth, nor can false Christs and prophets produce true salvation.

Test the Spirit

What does verse 2 mean? "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." It means this is the Christ of the Bible, God of the Trinity, God come in the flesh. If one believes their heart is now a heart of flesh and their soul is now spiritually alive and this is seen in the disposition of loving reverence and submission to Jesus Christ, who is of God and is God. So, the sign of the Spirit's reality is not just the truth of the words

coming out of the mouth of a prophet, pastor, preacher or Christian, but also the state of the heart, a heart that is in submission because it believes, truly believes God's revealed truth in Christ.

The Holy Spirit bears witness to the genuineness of a believer or a prophet in two ways. One is by producing the fruit of the Spirit, beginning with love, and the other is by producing a genuine confession of doctrinal truth about Jesus Christ that can be observed in a changed life.

A heartfelt act of love and a heartfelt confession of truth are both owing to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Therefore, the genuineness of our love and the genuineness of our belief about Christ, as has been revealed in the Bible, are the evidence of God's work in our lives. They are the Holy Spirit's testimony that we are the children of God.

Test of Hearing

Follow me down to verse 6 of 1st John 4, “We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” This verse takes us in the same direction as verse 2. It answers the same question as verse 2, how can we recognize “the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error” and know the difference? John takes two different approaches to the same problem or question. Verse 2 speaks of people who are or are not sincere. If they are not sincere they do not possess truthfulness of heart when they speak. A believer speaks from a new heart given to them by believing in Christ. Here in verse 6 the test is will they allow or will they hear the sincere

and truthful Word of God and the testimony of believers? Will they listen and will they allow the Word of God into their hearts?

Verse 6 reads, “We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” So the test of whether you have the Spirit of truth is whether you listen to and take in the apostles' teaching. What are the apostle's teachings? They are the lessons given by Christ for three years to the apostles and it is the inspired words of God given to the apostles by the Holy Spirit that we call the New Testament. What did Paul say about the importance of the apostle's teachings? To the Galatians he wrote, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!” (Galatians 1:8-9) I would say, this is clear; change what the Bible says, change what Jesus said and taught or change the teachings of the apostles, and you are in deep trouble – you are to be accursed. Accursed means to be damned to hell. You would think this might scare some of the denominations and preachers who are doing just this? It would scare them to the foundation of their souls if they had a spiritually alive soul. Change the Bible or change who Christ is and you will be damned to hell.

In verse 2 we saw that saying the right words or the truth of scripture does not guarantee someone is a believer. So to come to church and listen to the Word of God preached is no guarantee of hearing by the ear of one's heart and soul. One must believe to become a child of God.

So we find the answer is the same for both verses 2 and 6. Verse 2 is referring not

to words but to words that come forth from the heart. Verse 6 is referring not to just listening but to a listening that allows words to go into the heart. Not just any listening proves the presence of the Holy Spirit. But the humble listening that accepts the truth of Christ and submits gladly to it—that listening is a sign of the Spirit of truth at work in the heart.

It is the testimony of the God's Spirit that assures us that we are the children of God is the work of the Holy Spirit that enables us listen to the gospel submissively as we see in verse 6 and confess the gospel of the biblical Christ with the passion of a new spiritually alive heart as John speaks of in verse 2.

The point of 1 John, chapter 4, verses 1 to 6 is not just to give us a doctrinal test for discerning false prophets. If it were, then verse 2 would **not** say, "[By this you know the Spirit of God.](#)" Instead it would say, "*By this we know the spirit of antichrist.*" The point of these verses is not a doctrinal test for recognizing false spirits only. They give a test also for recognizing the true Spirit. Therefore the test must be more than doctrinal, because true doctrine by itself is no sure sign of the work of the Spirit. Anybody can say true doctrines with his lips and can still have a disconnect with their heart. Only the Spirit can make sinners sincerely listen and truly confess the truth of Jesus.

So the great overarching lesson that lies just beneath the surface in this text is that none of us will listen to the message of Christ unless the Holy Spirit overcomes our resistance and gives us ears to hear. Both Moses and Luke spoke concerning people's inability to spiritually hear apart from the power of the Holy Spirit in Deuteronomy 29 and the Book of Acts 16. Not one of us will confess from the heart that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh unless by the power of the Holy Spirit

we are humbled to the point we accept the authority of Jesus over our lives. John's great assumption lying just beneath the surface of verses 2 and 6 is that true believers hear the gospel with openness and confess Christ with true faith and this is the work and the gift of the Holy Spirit. If this listening and this confessing could be explained in any other way, they would not be a sure sign of the Spirit's presence and power. We know from the apostles and from personal experience the heart of flesh and the regenerated soul are the signs of God's power. The Apostle John knows by his own regenerated soul that no one hears and no one confesses apart from the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.

Test of True and False

There is one place in our text where John's assertion of the power of God comes up from beneath the surface. In verse 4 John shows it in clear view for all to see. John lets it be seen so clearly in order to encourage and humble his little children. "Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."

The Christians, John is writing to, have conquered the false prophets. They have conquered them in that they have not been swept away by their deception. We know this by what John wrote, "I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one." (1 John 2:14)

John goes on to explain, "I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you." (v.26) John says they will know deceivers because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in verse 27. These prophets have attacked with their defective views of Christ and the Christians have stood firm. They have not yielded. They

have remained orthodox and loyal to the Son of God incarnate. They believe in the God-man Jesus Christ.

How did these Christians stand firm? The foe that attacked them was not human and was supernatural. It was Satan himself, the god of this age, who empowered the false prophets. Satan is extraordinarily appealing, wickedly attractive and deceptive. How did these Christians stand firm in their faith? It was neither by their own intelligence nor was it by their own strength. They are but "little children." John says they conquered because He who was in them is greater than he who is in the world. In other words they conquered by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the same today and Christians will continue to be faithful and overcome the evil of this world by the power of the Holy Spirit until Christ returns in power and glory.

Verses 2 and 6 are made clear in their meaning by verse 4; it is the Holy Spirit that is more powerful than the satanic forces of deception and blindness. Every believer owes his faith to the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. If we stand with Christ, listening receptively and confessing loyally, it is because the Holy Spirit is greater than all other forces in the world and has removed the blindness and hardness of our own hearts and has revealed the deception of the enemy.

For believers stand on the fact that as John wrote, my, **“Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”** This great truth gives faith, hope and strength to believers. It is the Holy Spirit that has made it possible for believers to believe in God incarnate, Jesus Christ since He came to the earth for our salvation. Amen and Amen! Let’s pray.