

“Test the Spirits” (1 John 4:1–6)

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When we watch movies or read novels, we encounter different types of stories. Sometimes, when you start to watch or read a story, you think, “Oh, I know this type of story.” There’s the coming-of-age story, the unlikely friends story, the star-crossed lovers story, the unlikely hero story. And one of the stories that seems to captivate audiences is the “there’s more to reality than meets the eye” story.

Last Sunday night, I watched a movie called *Dr. Strange* on Netflix. This is one of the latest movies featuring a Marvel Comics character. Dr. Strange is a very successful and arrogant neurosurgeon who has a serious car accident. His precious hands have massive nerve damage, to the extent that he can no longer be a surgeon. He’s desperate to find a way to heal, and this leads him to Kathmandu, Nepal, where he encounters something of a spiritual guru called the Ancient One. The Ancient One teaches Dr. Strange how to tap into magical powers. At first, Dr. Strange is someone who believes the only reality that exists is this material world. He says, “There is no such thing as spirit. We are made of matter and nothing more. You’re just another tiny, momentary speck within an indifferent universe.” But then he’s proven wrong. Within the universe of this story, there’s an “astral dimension” where soul exists apart from body. Dr. Strange is then taught how to harness energy from different dimensions so that he can become a defender of this world.

There are other stories that are similar. *The Matrix* is another such movie. In that movie, our protagonist finds that reality is very different than what it seems to be. What appears to be reality is really just a computer simulation. This week, I started reading my kids *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, and that story is, in its own way, a “reality is more than meets the eye” story. In that story, another world beyond our own exists, an enchanted world.

I think these stories are popular not just because they’re entertaining, but also because they grasp something true. They touch on an intuition that we have, that there’s more to reality than meets the eye.

The truth is that this world doesn’t consist of matter only. Reality isn’t just natural, but it’s supernatural, too. There are realities that we can’t see. This world is full of spiritual beings, who we can’t see and who aren’t the proper subjects of science. There is the Holy Spirit, but

there are also evil spirits. Though we can't see spirits, they're everywhere. The Bible clearly teaches that we live in a supernatural reality, and we all will be affected by one spirit or another.

If you're not a Christian, you may find that to be ridiculous. But I would encourage you to set aside any natural objection you might have to talk of evil spirits and Satan, and even the Holy Spirit. Consider that the message of Christianity just might be true, that it makes the best sense of our lives, and its message is coherent and, once you grant the existence of supernatural beings, rational and logical. I would invite you to walk into the wardrobe, or to take the red pill.

Have you ever heard people say, "I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual"? That is no doubt true. But the question for us is: Of which spirit are we? Are we spiritual because the Holy Spirit, who is God, dwells in us? Or are we spiritual because evil spirits mislead us? In other words, how do we know that our spirituality is from God?

And that leads us to another question: how do we know when a message is from God? How can we test whether someone or something is from the Holy Spirit or an evil spirit?

These are questions raised by today's passage, 1 John 4:1–6. If you haven't been with us before, we've been reading a book in the New Testament called 1 John, a letter written by one of Jesus' first followers. John wrote this letter because he wanted his readers, Christians in churches, to know the truth about Jesus. When John wrote, there had been people who recently left these churches, people who taught false things about Jesus. John didn't want his readers to be shaken in their faith. He wanted them to remain in the truth, to have certainty about the message they first heard about Jesus.¹

In this passage, John warns his readers that there are false prophets who speak a false message about Jesus. Of course, there is the true message about Jesus, the one which they have heard and believed. John wants his readers to know which message is true and which one is false. Let's first read the entire passage, and then I'll go back and explain it piece by piece.

¹ 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. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ 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 already. ⁴ 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. ⁵ They are from the

¹ 1 John 5:13: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life." Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ 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.

Let's begin with that first verse. John says that we can't "believe every spirit." Instead, we should "test the spirits to see whether they are from God." Why? "For many false prophets have gone out into the world." The Bible warns about false prophets, people who falsely claim to speak for God. Several books of the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, warn about false teachers or false prophets. Jesus himself said, in Matthew 7:15, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." He said that we would "recognize them by their fruits" (vv. 16, 20), which means their way of life. Peter, another one of Jesus' disciples, said, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction" (2 Pet. 2:1).²

What's clear from these passages and many others like them is that false teachers not only say false things about God, but they live immoral lives and their way of life—including what they teach—is destructive. Truly, one's eternal destiny is on the line here. So, we have to be on guard.

False teachers have always been around and they always will be around. More precisely, they've been around since people have been in rebellion against God and they will be around until people are no longer rebels against God. As long as the world is the way it is, fallen with the power of sin in it, there will be people who don't trust God. They will try to distort the words of God. They do this because they don't want to submit to God and his design for our lives. And they'll always have an audience.

Consider what another apostle, Paul, said about false teaching. In his second letter to his younger associate, Timothy, he writes:

¹ I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and

² See also Deut. 13:1–6; Acts 20:30; 2 Cor. 11:13; Jude 4.

wander off into myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Tim. 4:1–5).

Paul knew that people have “itching ears” that they will want to have scratched by words they want to hear. We don’t necessarily want to know the truth. The truth challenges us, convicts us, demands us to change. Since some people don’t want the truth, they gather to themselves people who will say what they want to hear.

What did these false prophets, the ones that John mentions, teach? From the whole of this letter, it’s likely that these false teachers claimed to know the truth of God. Perhaps they claimed that they didn’t sin, or that they had moved beyond sin. But they didn’t obey the commandments of Jesus. They surely didn’t love Christians. But here, John focuses on one particular issue. Look again at verses 2 and 3: “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 already.” The truth is that Jesus came “in the flesh.” But the false teachers didn’t confess that. What does this mean?

John clearly believes that Jesus is the Son of God (1:3), that he is righteous (2:1), that he is sinless (3:5), that he satisfied God’s wrath against our sin (4:10), that he truly died (5:6), and that he is God (5:20). But here, John stresses Jesus’ humanity. Jesus came in the flesh. He actually was—and is—a human being. As the eternal Son of God, Jesus knows no beginning. But at one point in history, he added a second nature, a human one, when he was conceived in a virgin’s womb and was later born in Bethlehem. He grew up in Nazareth, raised by a carpenter and his wife. He ate, he drank, he became tired and slept. He actually died and rose from the grave. He is the God-man, truly God and truly human.

There have been many false teachings regarding Jesus. The two basic ones deny either his divinity or his humanity. Muslims and Jehovah’s Witnesses believe in *a* Jesus, but not *the* Jesus of the Bible. That is, they don’t believe that Jesus is God. Muslims think he’s only a prophet. Jehovah’s Witnesses believe he is a lesser deity than God; in fact, they believe he is Michael the Archangel. It seems the heresy regarding Jesus that John was encountering was Docetism. This teaching held that Jesus only appeared to have a human body. This was part of a larger belief system which taught that the material world is bad. Therefore, the Son of God couldn’t actually become material, or else he would be corrupted.

All of this may sound strange to our modern ears, but every age has its own heresies. Today's may not be so much about the person of Jesus (though, remember, we do have Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons and New Age spiritualists, and all kinds of people who believe different things about Jesus). Today's heresies tend to revolve around what Jesus taught about ethics, particularly sexuality.

We may ask, why does any of this matter? Well, I probably don't need to convince you that how we live matters. I think most people still believe that certain things are right and certain things are wrong, even if we disagree on what exactly is right or wrong. And if there's a God—and there is—then he certainly cares about how we live. But I'm talking not about ethics, but about who exactly Jesus is. What does it matter if some people have slightly different views about Jesus?

Well, it certainly matters who Jesus is. When Jesus prayed to the Father on the night before he died, he said, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). So, we need to know Jesus to have eternal life. That means having a relationship with him. That means we'll know facts about him, like if he's truly God and truly man. So, knowing matters.

And it really matters whether Jesus is both God and man. If Jesus is not both God and man, there is no salvation. Jesus is the only Savior. He saves us from sin, from condemnation, from death, from separation from God. And he does that because he lived the perfect human life—the life that we don't live—and he died in place of all who come to him. His sacrifice on the cross came at one point in history, but it has eternal consequences.

If Jesus were not God, he wouldn't be perfect, unchangeable, and eternal. He couldn't live the perfect human life if he himself wasn't perfect. If he were changeable, perhaps his character could change. He might no longer be perfect. And if he wasn't eternal, we might wonder if the Lamb of God would cease to exist. As the once-and-for-all sacrifice for sin, he always exists as our living sacrifice (in the book of Revelation, he is still referred to as a bloody Lamb, as a sacrifice). He is pleading his sacrifice before the Father continually. But if he ceased to exist, our sins would no longer be covered. For these reasons, we need him to be God.

But we also need him to be truly human. He is the only human being who is perfectly obedient, the perfectly obedient child of God, the perfectly obedient covenant partner who does the work that God wants him to do, the one who fulfills the terms of God's plans, who always

meets God's requirements of us. Also, if he weren't human, he couldn't die in place of humans, taking on their sin. We need a human who lives the life we should live and don't live, and we need a human to take our sin from us and pay the penalty for it.

So, that's why this really matters. If it didn't, there wouldn't be books like 1 John or Galatians in the Bible, books that clarify what the gospel is and isn't. But since we're fighting against supernatural evil that distorts the truth, we need to have these books. They are the means that God uses to keep us in the truth.

You see, John tells us that false teachers aren't just people who make some well-intentioned errors. They are swayed by the "spirit of the antichrist." John has already described them as "children of the devil" (3:10). What this means is that false messages don't originate with false prophets. They come from Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44). False teaching is far more powerful and dangerous than we often imagine.

But John wants to encourage us that Jesus is greater than Satan. True Christians can be assured that they know the truth, because of that fact. Look again at verse 4: "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 "them" of this verse must be the false prophets and the evil spirits behind them. John's readers, Christians, have overcome them. They haven't overcome through their own strength or goodness. They overcome because "he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." That means Jesus is greater than the devil.³ The only way to overcome Satan, evil, and death itself is through Jesus. John, in the book of Revelation, says, that Christians "have conquered him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 12:11). The worst that Satan could do was to get the Son of God to die, but this was God's plan. God had to have someone die for sin, and Jesus willingly sacrificed himself. Satan thought he had won, but Jesus not only died for sin, he also rose from the grave. The worst that the devil could throw at Jesus couldn't keep him down. And one day, Jesus will destroy the devil.

Until that time, the war between truth and lies continues. We see this in verses 5 and 6. First, here's verse 5: "They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them." The false prophets are "from the world." "The world" here means the realm opposed to God. These false teachers are opposed to God, and that is why "the world" listens to them. Remember, people have "itching ears." People who aren't transformed by God,

³ Satan is called "the ruler of the world" in John's Gospel (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

who aren't anointed with the Holy Spirit, who aren't born again don't naturally listen to God. They're not children of God, though they may be very religious, and they're certainly spiritual. It's just that they listen to the wrong spirits.

But God's people listen to God. They listen to the message of Jesus, which came from him through his apostles to them—and to us. Look at verse 6: “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.” The “we” probably means the apostles. John knew his message was “from God” because he was commissioned by Jesus himself. But I think the “we” then extends to everyone who takes up the apostle's message. Whoever knows God listens to that message. In fact, that's one mark of a Christian. The Christian cares about the gospel. He or she listens to God's word. And to “listen” doesn't just mean to hear a sound; listening means hearing and doing. As Jesus himself said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

Christians also have the “Spirit of truth,” the Holy Spirit (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 5:6). He dwells in Christians and guides them. In the past, he guided humans to write the Bible, moving through them to write the words that he wanted them to write.⁴ So, ultimately, he is the author of the Bible. And that's why the Bible is so important. It's not just some dead men's words about God. It is God's word, written through (now) dead men. The Holy Spirit within Christians brings them to his word, the Bible. And that is the way God communicates truth to us.

Now that we've gone through this passage, I want us to think about how it applies to us today.

First, I want to address what John does here and in other places in this letter. It's very clear that John is making a strong distinction between Christians and non-Christians. He's drawing a line in the sand and saying, “Little children, if you're children of God, stay on this side of the line.” And that rubs people the wrong way, particularly people who are awash in relativism, the idea that there are no absolute rights or wrongs, no one true religion. Some people think we shouldn't draw lines. I've even heard this from people who are pastors of churches.

In some churches, they don't believe in making fixed lines in the sand about membership or doctrine. They say things like, “You don't have to believe in order to belong.” Now, I want non-Christians to join us in worship. You don't have to be a believer yet to come and listen. I

⁴ 2 Pet. 1:20–21; Matt. 22:43; Acts 1:16; 4:25; 28:25; Heb. 3:7; 9:8; 10:15.

welcome the curious and the skeptical. But being a member of a church means something, and we require someone to believe the gospel, this message about Jesus that John and the other apostles teach, in order to be a member of the church.

I've heard some other pastors say that they don't want their churches to make decisions about whether certain things are morally right or wrong. The big issues now all seem to relate to sexuality, marriage, and gender. Some churches are saying, "We're not going to divide over the issue of same-sex marriage. Some people here are opposed to it and some accept it as valid. So, we're not going to talk about it." But to do that is to draw a line in the sand. That statement creates a division. The people who want the church to shout loudly that same-sex marriages are blessed by God won't be happy. And those people who—rightly, I will add—see that the Bible is opposed to same-sex marriage won't be happy either. So, these people may leave the church. In that way, a division is created, which is ironic, since the people who refused to make a decision about the controversial issue were trying not to make a division.

We all draw lines in the sand. We all make exclusive truth claims. We all exclude some people and include others in our groups. This is a reality. The only question is whether we're going to know where to draw the line in the sand. What standard do we use? Do we change the lines according to the spirit of the age? Or, we might say, do we change the line when the spirit of this world tells us to? Or do we draw the line where the Holy Spirit has drawn it for us? To have a true standard, it needs to be fixed, eternal, transcendent. Otherwise, it's manmade, formed out of our changing opinions. It will be what we want to be true, but it likely won't be the truth.

That leads me to a second point. John tells us to test the spirits. How do we do that? We do that by knowing the Bible. False teachers often say things that are plausible. They say things that are partially true. The only way we can know if they are speaking the whole truth or not is to know the whole Bible, to know how to read it, and to know it well. We do that by gathering together to read, to study, to hear God's word preached. And we should read and study on our own, throughout the week. The Bible is the only way of knowing what God is like in any specific way. The Bible is the only way we can know what he demands of us. The Bible is the only written word from God, the one message that tells us about the human predicament, that we are separated from God by our sin. And the Bible alone tells us how we can be reconciled to God. The way we do that is by being united to Jesus. We trust him, we turn from our old ways of living, and we follow him.

Here's a third, but related point: we need to develop critical, Christian minds. I don't mean criticizing minds. I mean minds that can think critically and that can think according to what God has revealed in the Bible. We need to be discerning, not gullible and naïve. Some people are more gifted in this area than others, but we all can learn the Bible to know what is true and what is not.

The spirit of this age is incompatible with a biblical worldview. There is some overlap between a Christian worldview and various other worldviews, whether that worldview is atheistic materialism or Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism or anything else. But there will also be conflict. The Christian faith challenges and corrects false systems of belief, false ways of making sense of the world. The gospel challenges our hearts, our desires, and our actions. We need to know God's word in order to have a chance of discerning what is from God and what is from the world. If you don't really know the Bible, I would love to help you. I would be glad to sit and read some Scripture with you and give you some tools to make sense of the Bible.

Here's my fourth and final point: which side of the line are you on? Are you "of God" or "of the world"? Who are you listening to? Are you listening to God by reading the Bible, by being part of a church where all the Bible—not just parts of it—is taught? If you do that, you'll find that there are a number of times when God doesn't scratch our itching ears. He challenges us. He confronts us. He doesn't exist to make us happy. We exist to live for him, and when we do, we find true happiness. So, do you listen to a God who comforts and corrects, who encourages and convicts, who tells us he loves us but also says we're wrong and need to be conformed to his will? Or do you listen to things you want to hear? Do you say, "God can't possibly be like that?" Do you say, "If God is love, then he can't believe this is wrong, or that is wrong, because that's unloving?" Or do you say, "God is love, and I'm not in a position to determine what is loving. I must hear from God, who tells me what love is. And love is this: That he sent his Son to rescue me from my sin, to live the perfect life that I don't live, and to die in my place"?

Which side of the line are you on? You are on one side of the other. If you're not "of God," you can step over that line, even today. Trust Jesus. Follow him. Tell him that you've rejected him in the past, and that you've been wrong. Talk to him. Confess your sins and ask for forgiveness. Ask him for help to live a life that's pleasing to him. Start listening to him by reading the Bible. I would be more than happy to talk to you about this.

Jesus is greater than the one in the world. He's greater than us. He's greater than our hearts. And he's greater than our sin. He came to bring people to God. Let's join him. Let us all listen to him and do what he says.