

## Test the Spirits & Stick with the Apostles | Reading 4:1-6

At the beginning of the week I sat down to look at the text for this morning before getting distracted by St Patrick. I picked up my favourite biography, *St. Patrick of Ireland* by Philip Freeman, I opened it at random and read the following words I'd underlined about 5 or 6 years ago: *"We Irish who live at the ends of the earth are followers of Saints Peter and Paul and all those who wrote the Scriptures under the direction of the Holy Spirit. We teach nothing beyond the truth revealed in the Gospels and by the Apostles."* These words were written by an early Irish pilgrim called Columbanus. He wrote them in 613 in a letter sent urging the Pope to maintain orthodox teaching. The burden on his heart is the same burden expressed in our reading today, seen most clearly in verse 6.

When reading, studying & teaching a portion of Scripture it's good not only to ask what the main point is but also what the burden is? Why is John moved to write these words? Why does he need to make this point? John wants his readers to be able to discern between the Holy Spirit & other spirits. That's the burden & idea here. In the previous verses (3:24) he teaches God has given us his Holy Spirit & now he wants us to understand there are other spirits to be avoided. God has given us his Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth but there are other spirits at work in the world who could lead us into all kinds of error. So he commands us to test the spirits.

### Test the Spirits

The word translated test carries with it the idea of critical examination to determine the genuineness of something. It was used of testing metals. The aim to find the real not the counterfeit... In the NT believers are called to test themselves (2 Cor. 13:5), as well as their work (Gal 6:4). Christians, especially Christian leaders, are told that their work will be tested by fire (1 Cor. 3:13). Peter speaks of one's faith being tested by the fire of trials to prove its genuineness. Paul teaches us to test & discern what is pleasing to God (Phil 1:10; Eph 5:10). In 1 Thessalonians 5:21 Paul also commands us, in the context of not despising prophesy, to test everything & here John gives us a similar command when he tells us to test the spirits.

John tenderly 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."** He gives us both a command & a reason for the command. We are not to believe every spirit, we are to test every spirit! Why? Because many false prophets have gone out into the world! This verse sounds like 2:18 when John warns that; **"many antichrists have come"**. In fact in our verses today John implies it is the **"spirit of the antichrist"** who is energising the false prophets he is warning us about. And remember the false prophets John is talking about are those who were once within the church but then departed from the apostles teaching.

From this we learn that there is a need for critical examination in the Christian life. We are not being cynical when we do not believe every spirit we are being obedient. It is good, healthy and obedient to test the spirits, to ask questions, to use our minds which should be ever renewed by the Scriptures. We should not just go along with everything we should test everything to discern if God is at work.

I think the Bible shows us two dangers. There is a warning in the fact the scribes & Pharisees missed their Messiah when he stood in front of them & even accredited his miracles to the devil. We do not want to be like them. Yet neither do we want to swing to the other extreme which is what John is talking about here. Christians are neither to be cynical or gullible when it comes to spiritual things. We're not to stand with a damp towel ready to throw it on the first bit of spiritual passion. Nor are we to gullibly go along with all that happens in the name of the Holy Spirit. We are to **"test the spirits"**, for not everything that is supernatural is Divine. In the NT all believers are encouraged to make to use their own spiritual judgement (1 Cor. 2:15) & in church we need to allow room for this. Let's look at two more Scriptures which help us understand this idea of spiritual testing. This time it is God doing the testing:

**DEUT 12:32-13:4**

**2 THESS 2:9-12.**

These passages underline that not everything that is supernatural is Divine. Signs & wonders alone are not sufficient proof that it is God is at work. Jesus who himself performed powerful signs and wonders also warned that **"false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect"** (Matt 24:24). Signs and wonders might be God at work but they might not be, so to be sure we need to look to something else as our barometer – TRUTH! Those words in 2 Thessalonians teach us we need to be lovers of truth more than lovers of miracles & it is to doctrinal truth that John turns to in verses 2-3.

### ***1. The Truth About Christ***

John writes; **"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."** John's particular example shows he is not teaching us to be doctrinal nitpicks; yet he is teaching us to be doctrinally discerning. He is talking about undermining of core Christian doctrine concerning the nature of Christ.

The test is not how powerful or novel the prophet is but how truthful they are when it comes to what they say about God/Christ. The Deuteronomy passage underlines this & so do the verses we're looking at today, & 2 Thessalonians warns that if we love displays of power more than hearing the truth then we're lining ourselves up for eternal trouble. This is why all this is so important.

Of course we want to see displays of God's power; of course we desire to see miracles in people's lives & circumstances, but not at the expense of core Christian truth! And God will test us on this. Truth is what helps us test the Spirits. In the context John was writing in was the early form of Gnosticism I've noted before. Some had claim superior knowledge beyond the apostles & this superior knowledge led to a denial of the incarnation; that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. For this reason they were in essence teaching another Jesus. Jesus is the centre of all truly Christian theology. Once people depart from or add to what Scripture teaches about him they depart from authentic Christianity. This is why knowing the essentials of core Christian doctrine is so important; this is why the famous creeds of the Church have been written. This is why part of one of our own foundational truths says; *"We believe in the true and proper deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His virgin birth. In His real and complete humanity..."*

## **2. The Greater One Within**

John goes on to tell us there in another dynamic at work to help us test the spirits. In verse 4-5 he writes: **"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 dynamic of the Greater One within! This is another reference to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who is the abiding anointing & who teaches us to abide in Christ (2:27), the Spirit who is the seed that abides & produces the practice of righteousness in our lives (3:9), the Spirit who God has given us (3:24), the Spirit who is the truth & who testifies to the truth (5:6) is here referred to the Greater One in us. Not only is God greater than our hearts (3:20) but he has also given us the Greater One within to help us overcome every false prophet (4:4). We have not only been given apostolic truth to help us test the spirits but the same Spirit who guided the apostles into all truth.

John points us to the truth given from the beginning a number of times in this letter and he tells us about the Spirit given to every Christian. He is the greater one within who helps us test every whether something is from God or not. John's Gospel helps us understand more about how this works. In John's Gospel Jesus says; **"But the helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you"** (John 14:26). Earlier in the chapter Jesus calls him the **"Spirit of truth"**. The Spirit of truth can never be responsible for error, instead he reminds us of truth. So when we are sitting listening to something that is not quite right, we have the Spirit in us to remind us of truth...

In John 15:26-27 Jesus says; **"But when the helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning."** In John 16:13-14 Jesus tells his disciples; **"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."**

**He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”** This same Spirit who was given to guide the apostles into all truth etc has also been given to every Christian to help us discern truth, to help us test the spirits... He has been given to bear witness to the true Christ, to glorify the true Christ, to help us know & understand all we need to about the true Christ, so we can overcome the spirit of the antichrist. So we should ask; is the prophet bearing witness to the true Christ? Is the fruit of his life & words of his mouth witnessing to & glorifying the true Christ? Is he helping us know and understand the true Christ we read about in our Bible? This is how we test what spirit a prophet or teacher is energised by.

### **Stick With the Apostles**

John then writes in verses 5-6; **“They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. 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 is a real note of clarity regarding trusting the right source. We have the Spirit within to help us test the spirits but we also have the solid eyewitness testimony of the apostles. Like in chapter 2 when John was on a similar subject he uses the language of “they” & “us”, **“they speak from the world... we are from God.”** The **“we”** is clearly the apostles, those who looked upon & touched, seen & heard (1:1-4). As John wrote in 2:24; **“Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you...”** and it’s what was heard from the beginning that we have in our New Testaments - **“By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”**

It's not cynicism to test things by the teaching by Scripture; it is what we're meant to do! John writes; **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.”** We listen to these same eyewitnesses through the testimony of the NT, we have listened to John this morning, & this is how we know the Spirit of truth & the spirit of error. As the first of our foundational beliefs goes; *“We believe the Bible as originally given, to be without error, the fully inspired and infallible Word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct.”* This is why we believe this. Our passage this morning strengthens this conviction & encourages us to recommit to it is the days we live in.