1 John 4:1-6 Test the spirits…

1. Introduction

a. In popular culture today the supernatural, the paranormal and the spiritual are all super-popular. There is an increasing fascination and engagement with the spirit world. Why? God creates and Satan counterfeits. We are caught between the genuine and the fake, that which brings life and that which leads to death. We are not exempt from this world of conflict, and that is why God gives us tools to help us to be able to distinguish between truth and error.

b. We were created by God as three parts: body, soul and spirit. How we function as human beings is best understood this way: we are a spirit that has a soul that is expressed through a body.

c. Your spirit is the most fundamental element of who you are, it is your spirit that will continue beyond the grave. It is the part of you that is of the same nature as God himself. You are involved in a battle over your spirit. But the primary ground that this battle takes place in isn't in your spirit, but in your soul.

    i Your soul is your mind, your will and your emotions – those are the areas your soul mainly functions in, and it is in these areas that the soul has control over that will largely determine what happens in your body. The way that God designed us at the beginning is that the body is subject to the soul and the soul is subject to the spirit.

d. The material world is constantly being impacted by the spiritual world, which, the bible says, consists of both good and evil. Hence the necessity to be able to discern between these spiritual influences. The spirit of this world is seeking to infiltrate and deceive and distract the body of Christ in ever increasing measure, and we need to know how to discern between what is truly of God and that which is not.

e. False cults and religions lure millions with promises of fulfilment, happiness and true spirituality. Even in the church there are deceptions and false teaching that lead many astray into over-emphases or excess that may eventually cause them to fall away. And it's all for the want of understanding a few basic principles that John gives us in this letter.

f. You are engaged in a spiritual battle. Paul tells us that it's not a battle against flesh and blood, but it is a battle fought against principalities and powers and forces of spiritual wickedness that have invaded this world. Their first line of attack will always be to try to prevent you from hearing and responding to the gospel of the kingdom. Their next strategy is to try and get you side-tracked by enticing you with some soulish ear-tickling that leads you down a path of wrong thinking.

1 Timothy 4:1 *Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons…*

    i We must not underestimate or minimise the subtlety of these demonic teachings. Some are a misinterpretation or a distortion or skewed application of scripture leading to a lifestyle of false hope where many lose heart and fall away. From this root we see such false teachings as the hyper-grace movement and the pre-tribulation rapture.

ii Many of the false teachings we see in the church today have their roots in Gnosticism. These are the teachings that lean heavily on some kind of secret or advanced knowledge of spiritual things. Some rely on material that is external to the bible – for instance the cult of Mormonism with the book of Mormon. Be very suspicious of any teaching that you come across that claims to unlock the "secret" to any aspect of the Christian life, whether that relates to healing, or prayer, or the courts of heaven, or prosperity and so on.

iii God has given us his word, and in it we will find everything we need for life and godliness. It is the word of life and it is a living word. If we apply that living word under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we will not go far wrong, because the holy Spirit is the one who will guide us into all truth, and all that is true.

2. Test the spirits to see if they are from God

1 John 3:24 – 4:1-6 *Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us. [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 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.*

a. In our passage for today John tells us how important it is to understand that you can't believe everything you hear or that people say is from God, or that contains biblical language. You can't believe all who claim to speak for God or claim to be speaking with a prophetic voice. The word "spirit" in the Greek is "***pneuma***" and is the same word as is used for breath or wind, that means that these spirits are living things. Every spirit has a will or an intent and it is that will that it wants to impose itself on to others who are spiritually receptive.

b. It's not the obviously ungodly spirits that John is warning us about here. What John wants us to be aware of are the subtle half-truths and almost-truths that sound convincing, but are not from God.

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 *For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. [14] And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. [15] So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.*

i Satan disguises himself as an angel of light; in the same way many of his servants who do his work may appear to be genuine. He will present himself in the guise of the harmless, the mainstream, the everyday so that he doesn't stand out from the crowd.

ii If you look at the verses that precede and follow this passage today, they are about love and loving one another. Many false spirits make a great deal of the subject of love. Many cults, false movements and groups that deviate from the truth make their appeal in the name of love. But when you look more closely it is mostly about a humanistic love and nothing to do

with the love of God that John is talking about. Satan loves to take God's words and distort them, twisting them to his own ends.

c. Here's what we're talking about today – here's the definition of a test: "A procedure intended to establish the quality or reliability of something, especially before it is taken into widespread use." We use this test to be sure of what we are hearing before we take it on board and before we spread it. The surest way we have to do that is through the Word of God – the more we are grounded in the Word, the less easily we will be misled by a spirit of error or a demonic spirit.

3. Why…

1 John 4:1 *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.*

a. The reason John gives us for our need to test the spirits is because Satan and his forces are at work in the world, and they are out to deceive the saints and lead them astray if they can. Some say it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe in something. This is the enemy's ploy is to get us to concentrate on the necessity of belief rather than relationship.

   i What we believe is important, because we do need a good grasp of the truth as revealed in the scriptures, but God is more interested in our relationship with him than in what we believe. A love of the truth and an understanding of it comes out of our relationship with God. When you know God personally for yourself you have the ability to discern what is truly from him and what is not.

b. John says we need to test the spirits if we're going to discern between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. There is a spirit behind every teaching, and he warns us that many false prophets have gone out into the world.

   i The way many of these evil spirits work is by getting as close to the truth as possible and then introducing a little twist of untruth or a lie that will ultimately lead us away from God. They are like forgers, whose aim is to produce something as close as possible to the real thing, but in reality has no real value, it looks good but it is just an empty promise.

   ii Many false teachers profess to believe in Jesus and they may quote scriptures and use biblical language. They may have very charismatic personalities and speak with convincing arguments. But if they fail in any of the tests that John outlines in the next couple of verses, then they are false teachers teaching doctrines of demons, and we must not listen to them.

4. How…

a. How do we test the spirits? A false teacher may be gentle and loving, they may speak prophecies that come true, or cast out demons or perform miracles. But does he lead people to follow a false God? Here is the positive test that will show us that something is coming from the Spirit of God and not from a demonic spirit.

1 John 4:2-3 *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.*

b. Here John says "By this <u>you know</u> the Spirit of God…" – that's the ***ginosko*** knowing, the knowing by personal experience. So John is talking about an inner witness here. This test will confirm in your heart, in your innermost being, whether this spirit is genuine or false.

c. What, or who, are these spirits that we are to test? We are rarely confronted by an actual spirit. Mostly, we encounter these spirits as they make themselves known in and through people. A spirit can be seen in someone's emotions – like anger or violence – or through their words or their character, and sometimes through their lifestyle choices. What John is highlighting here is how we should approach any kind of spiritual teaching.

   i It doesn't matter in what form we receive the teaching –reading a book, watching a video or a programme on God TV, or listening to a sermon or a message being preached – we need to test what we are hearing so that we know if it is genuinely from the Spirit of God or if it is from some other spirit.

d. John's test is simple – does this spirit, or this person who is teaching, confess that Jesus has come in the flesh? There's more to this question than meets the eye. This is not just about agreement with the historical fact. "Confess" biblically is a strong word. It means you are in complete agreement with something. This affirmation of Jesus' coming in the flesh is a confirmation of both his humanity and his deity – Jesus is both fully God and fully man.

e. This confronts one of the main tenets of Gnosticism that spirit is good and physical matter is evil. It is a confession that the spiritual nature of God and the physical nature of man can co-exist within the body of a man.

f. But it goes further because that confession is also agreement with what Jesus came to do while in the flesh. That means agreement with the establishment of the kingdom of God here on the earth. No evil spirit is going to come into agreement with the establishment of a kingdom that ultimately guarantees their destruction. But many of these spirits are lying spirits who are expert at twisting the truth to their own ends.

   i They may acknowledge it, but they must also confess it, that is the important thing.

Luke 4:33-34 *And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, [34] "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are---the Holy One of God."*

   ii They acknowledged what the Jews were too blind to see, the full deity of Jesus as well as his humanity. But, though demons acknowledged this, they never confessed it. They did not commit themselves to him, they did not live by this truth. There have been many who have acknowledged the deity of Jesus and his humanity, but they have never committed themselves to it, they have never confessed it.

g. John is saying our theology actually does matter. To deny that Jesus is fully God and fully man is a denial of the foundation of Christian faith. To fully atone for us on the cross Jesus had to be both man and God. Any teaching that denies that Jesus is both man and God, that he took on flesh in his incarnation is a doctrine of demons, and is the spirit of antichrist.

5. What…

1 John 4:4-6 *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 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.*

a. John refers to his readers as "little children" – not in a derogatory sense, he is appealing to us to adopt a child-like approach to trusting God. A child-like faith will stand us in good stead, trusting the Word of God and acting upon it. John is wanting to affirm you in these verses: he says because you are God's, you needn't fall victim to deception and lies.

b. we must take on board the power of verse 4. The "*he who is in you*" is the Holy Spirit. You have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside you, and there is no spirit of deception or false spirit that can overcome him, he is powerful and he wants us to know it. He is the spirit of truth, of wisdom and of revelation. If you know what is true you will be able to avoid what is false. He will lead you in all wisdom so that you are informed to make choices and decisions that are for your good. And he will reveal these things to all those who ask, seek and knock.

    i We overcome because he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. The Holy Spirit is infinitely greater than Satan. He's greater than the deceptiveness and hardness of our hearts.

    ii Because he is in you, you have access to all you need to avoid being deceived and robbed of

c. How does the Holy Spirit keep us from error? It's not automatic, it requires co-operation. The Spirit protects us through God's Word, which reveals the truth about the person and work of Jesus. The Word is the measure by which we test the spirits, but we need the Holy Spirit to bring revelation of God's word to our hearts and understanding to our minds.

d. Then you have the tools to be able to discern the truth. When you hear someone teaching something and you think "that doesn't sound right," that's the Spirit of God. That will send you back to the word to check out what you are hearing, and if it lines up to the scriptures or not.

e. Both those from the world and those from God will speak according to their source. Those who speak from the world find that the world is their audience. The world system is under Satan's dominion and functions by taking glory from God and transferring it to man in the fullness of his pride and self-will.

f. When you tell the world what it wants to hear, you will never lack an audience. But the problem is, their message is not from God. It is from the world and the god of this world. The practical application for us is, don't judge the success of a ministry by its size or its following! Judge it by its faithfulness to the truth as revealed in the Bible.

g. We must beware of allowing popular culture and the ways of the world to infiltrate the church so as to be seen as being "relevant." Scriptures does not promote relevance; the bible seems to indicate that we should be different, a holy nation, set apart for God.

h. Verse 6 needs a little explanation. John contrasts verse 5 where he says "they" are from the world, being the false teachers who have left the church. And so the "we" that he begins verse 6 with is not a reference to Christians in general, but is referring to his authority as an apostle.

i John is not speaking in his own name, nor in the name of the church, but as one of the apostles, who were given special authority, bestowed upon them by Jesus, to lay the foundation of the church through their witness and their teaching.

ii The apostolic teaching in the New Testament is foundational to our understanding of what Jesus came to do and what he will do when he comes again. It is the standard by which we are able to judge between truth and error, both for ourselves and for any teaching we receive. Without that standard, every person would become their own measure of "truth." We submit ourselves to the apostles' teaching as the plumb-line that keeps us anchored in the truth, and keeps us from error.

6. Conclusion

a. How do you tell the difference between the spirit of error and the Spirit of truth? The answer in verse 2 is what we <u>say</u> and then do. And the answer in verse 6 is what we <u>listen to</u> and then do. Both are important, what we say and what we listen to are both predicated upon what we then do in response to what we confess with our lips and hear with our ears. It's a two-way process, what goes in and what comes out.

b. A.W.Tozer has devised a check-list that we can apply to any teaching that we hear. Here are 7 questions to ask that will help us discern whether what we are hearing is of God or of a spirit of error.

i How does the teaching affect my relationship with God? Is He magnified and glorified, or diminished?

ii How does the teaching affect my attitude toward the Lord Jesus Christ? Does it magnify Him and give Him first place? Or, does it subtly shift my focus onto myself or some experience?

iii How does the teaching affect my attitude toward Scripture? Did the teaching come from and agree with the Word? Does it increase my love for the Word?

iv How does the teaching affect my self-life? Does it feed self or crucify it? Does it feed pride or humility?

v How does the teaching affect my relationships to other Christians? Does it cause me to withdraw, find fault, and exalt myself in superiority? Or, does it lead me to genuine love for all that truly know Christ?

vi How does the teaching affect my relationship to the world system? Does it lead me to pursue the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life? Does it lead me to pursue worldly riches, reputation, and pleasures? Or, does it crucify the world to me?

vii How does the teaching affect my attitude toward sin? Does it cause me to tolerate sin in my life or to turn from it and grow in holiness? Any teaching that makes holiness more acceptable and sin more intolerable is genuine.