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How Do We Know It's God? – 1 John 4:1-6

I believe one of the most difficult aspects of our Christian journeys is determining the difference between things of God and things of the world. When I have a decision to make in my life, how do I determine what God wants me to do? Better said perhaps, how do I know which voice in my head to listen to. (you all hear voices too, right?) How do I know which person amongst my friends to trust and believe have the best advice in a given situation? And as you will see in our passage this morning, John describes this as discerning between the spirits. And John urges us to **“test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”**

Let's go ahead and read this passage. **Read 1 John 4:1-6.**

We live in a world where countless people are presenting various opinions about things and many of them are claiming that their opinion is from God. When John wrote this letter, the situation was no different. John had just finished emphasizing that Christians can have confidence in their faith because of the Holy Spirit in them. But this then raised another issue, what do we do when those that are doing things detrimental to the church also claim that they are responding to the Holy Spirit? The question is pertinent for us today too . . . if everyone is claiming they are the one's on God's side, how do we know who is right?

It is important to understand immediately that for John and God everything is spiritual. In our language today we like to create nice little compartments in our lives. Some things are spiritual, but other things are not. For instance, what church I am a part of or how much I pray or read my Bible are spiritual things, but which car I drive, where I work, what I eat, etc. are not spiritual things. But the Bible and John in this passage do not draw such a distinction. The reality is that everything is spiritual. Every decision has the potential to either move us towards God or away from God.

Spirits are movements or breaths or winds of a non-physical nature. As we interact physically in touching and feeling, spirits interact in our world prompting us, moving us, convicting us, tempting us . . . We often experience these movements as voices in our head or our conscience. We experience a tugging back and forth between two alternative actions or thoughts. Should we spend time with certain friends?

Should I go play golf or should I spend time with my family? Should I pursue this new job opportunity or should I be content? Should I fail that student or should I give him another chance? As the questions of our life come to us we feel not just a physical need to make a decision, but a spiritual battle over what to do.

Since as John points out, everything is spiritual, then we must be skilled at discerning which way we are being pulled. Is the spirit we are responding to drawing us closer to God or pulling us further apart?

There are many spirits that should not be believed in our world.

I have told the Leadership Team and staff this story, but last year when I was at our denomination's annual meeting I heard about a church in Indianapolis that was leaving our denomination. Apparently there was a church in Indianapolis that had grabbed onto a theology through which they believed that their pastor was Jesus returned. And because they believed this, they no longer needed the denomination. After all, when Jesus is your pastor, why would you need a network of churches to give you support and hold you accountable. Your pastor is perfect. At our meeting, we spent several minutes praying particularly for this church and especially the people in it that are clearly being led astray by false spirits and false teaching.

I read an article a little while ago about a guy named Jose Luis de Jesus Miranda. He is a pastor of a church in Miami, Florida and his congregation calls him, "daddy." He says that he is God. He tells a story about angels coming to him and telling him that he was Jesus reincarnate. His church calls itself the "Government of God on Earth." He has several Rolex wristwatches and travels in armored Lexuses and BMW's . . . of course for his safety. He has thousands of followers in 30 countries. That is really scary.

Now those might be extreme examples, but there are plenty that are less extreme and perhaps more difficult for us. A friend gives us advice on how we are to deal with conflict we are having with another friend. A co-worker asks us to pursue a particular task that we aren't sure is right or not. We have been feeling some promptings within that we should donate money rather than buy something new, confront our spouse about something that has been troubling us . . . there are countless moments when we find ourselves in a spot of decision where we are less than certain of what God wants us to do. And we experience competing voices in our heads that each argue passionately that they are "right."

To these situations our passage gives the following advice, “test the spirits.” We know tests. In a test someone asks a particular set of questions with the ultimate goal being the determination of whether someone is right or not. Tests help us to determine whether someone or something is doing what it is supposed to. We test a battery, for instance, to see whether it has a charge. We test coins to determine whether they are genuine.

Actually when I do wedding ceremonies I will often talk briefly about the wedding rings and how they are fitting emblems of the marital commitment because they are made of precious metals that have been tested and proven true to last a lifetime. That is why we don't use paper rings . . . they don't pass the test of time.

So if John calls us to test the spirits, what are we to test for? In verse 2 John says that we are to test whether a spirit **“acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.”** If the spirit acknowledges that this is true than it “is from God.” If the spirit does not acknowledge Jesus, then it is not from God. And not only is a spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus not from God, John says in verse 3 that it is the spirit of the anti-Christ. Every movement and pull in our world has its origin either in God or in the anti-Christ, the opposition to God and Jesus.

In these verses in 1 John 4 we find some keys in discerning the spirit of God from spirits that are not from God. **The first key is that we are to know the source.** We need to know the source from which our information comes.

John specifically tells us that we are not to believe everything we are told. We are called to examine the source and to particularly look at its understanding of Jesus. We get messages from all sorts of sources and many if not most of these sources use various gimmicks to lure us in.

Read recently that a county in the state of California is considering a law that would prevent fast food restaurants from placing toys in Happy Meals or kid's meals. Whether you agree or not with the law, everyone knows why fast food restaurants use the toys. It is so as parents are driving down 52 or 26 headed to the grocery store or some other place, their kids will peer out the windows of the minivan, spot the shining golden arches, and demand with excessive whining that they want to eat at McDonald's for the \$.50 toy. Its effective.

Or in our day of celebrities and television and big screens and personalities . . . sometimes we are lured in by fancy graphics and sly sales pitches . . . or a compelling speaking style or a famous endorsement.

It happens in the religious world too. Flip on your TV late at night and you will see all sorts of enticements too. Everything from \$50 bottles of healing holy water to people collapsing in the aisles.

And what makes this even more confusing is that sometimes these things involve unexplainable and apparent miraculous things. But those alone are not guarantee of divine origins. A good example of this is in the Bible when God is doing a bunch of miracles through Moses in an attempt to convince the Pharaoh to release the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. But as Moses would do something amazing, there were magicians in Egypt that could imitate many of the deeds that God did.

This problem of discerning what is true and not is not new problem. At the beginning of the Bible in Deuteronomy 18, God speaks through Moses in saying, **“how can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?”**

And the answer comes, know the source. Does the message encourage God’s people to worship and obey him, or does it lead them into idolatry? What someone says matters far more than how he says it, or whatever apparently supernatural signs he can produce to support it.

The test is not whether it feels right, but whether it is true.

Our measuring stick for truth is the Bible. We believe the Bible is our sole authority for faith, doctrine and conduct. It is God’s revelation to us that forms the basis or test that we use in evaluating what is happening. It is through the Bible that we evaluate the sources of the various ideas that we must make a commitment to.

Riverside understands the Bible as essential to our lives and choices. Nearly every Sunday I begin my sermon by reading a Scripture text. I understand that my authority to stand before you and share comes from the Word. You are not here to hear what I have come up with about life. You are here to hear what the Bible says about life. Just me talking might be fine, but the Word, God’s revelation to us has transformative power. It is true.

We test the spirits by understanding what is being conveyed about Jesus' identity. Sources that know and understand Jesus are trustworthy. As we examine sources, we ask ourselves whether their information, teaching, advice come from God's Word.

Let me try to give you an example of how this works. When I was a senior in college I was going through the grueling discernment process of trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. I was either going to go to law school or to seminary.

So the first thing I did was pray. And to be honest I did not feel any clear indications.

The next thing I did was seek after the opinions of those that I was close to. But very quickly I learned that there were people on all sides. Everyone seemed to think differently about the issues. And those are those difficult moments when we feel stuck. We don't know what to do and those closest to us are not helping much either.

But when we test the spirits, the Bible calls us to place the greatest weight not on the people that tell us what we want to hear or that are most passionate and certain about their answers, but those that most clearly come from a perspective that stems from their understanding of Jesus as God.

And we are not just looking for people that claim to follow Christ, we are looking for people whose lives look like Christ.

So, at the time I went to people in my church and I went to Dana. In fact, I still have the email she sent me about 10 years ago that drew out the positives and negatives of each.

Read some.

And I can remember going to the Bible seeking guidance. Reflecting on my identity in Christ and what that meant in the world.

Verse 4 not only gives us assurance that Christians have already overcome false spirits because God is in us, but points out that "evil spirits are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them."

We cannot see people's hearts. This is unnecessary and would be impossible any way. We need to listen to what people say, what they are confessing about Christ, and then to observe who their followers are.

We need to remind ourselves that some things are always true and some things are always false. Truth is not the present consensus of opinion, it is defined by the character of God. Many will say that the Bible has authority, just not supreme authority. The spirit of falsehood is the spirit of deceit. It is only by receiving the apostles' teaching and living a life that accords with this truth that we can know God. We are not to accept substitutes.

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