

## Testing the Spirits

1 John #9

1 John 4:1-6

*Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.*

Over Father's Day Weekend, I ran across a test that I fully plan to implement. It has a simple title: Are You Eligible to Date My Daughter? It has a simple goal: to separate the sheep from the goats. It has a simple motive: to let every adolescent male in Indian River County know that I am a preacher and a pastor. But I also moonlight as a stark raving overprotective lunatic when it comes to my baby girl. It only has three questions. Question #1: True or False. It is never permissible to ask me questions about sports and politics to get to know me. The only thing that is permissible is that when I ask you when you will return my daughter home, your answer better be "early." Question #2: True or False. Once you have gone out with my little girl, you will continue to date no one but her until she is finished with you. If you make her cry, I will make you cry. Question #3: True or False. As you stand in my front hallway, waiting for my daughter to appear, and more than an hour goes by, you are not permitted to sigh and fidget because my daughter is putting on her makeup, which is a process that can take longer than painting the Golden Gate Bridge. They better all be true.

The Bible speaks of tests often. God tested Abraham's priorities, Job's trust in Him in the midst of suffering, Israel's fidelity to Him in the land, and Jesus' fidelity to Him in the wilderness. People of God, I want to talk to you today about one of the greatest tests in all of the Bible. It's greatness lies in its context. It isn't a test God will give to you. It is a test that you are called to give. It is Testing the Spirits. "Do not believe every spirit," John says, "but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." The test has a reason. It is this: according to the Bible, there are always two spiritual forces at work in the world: the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of the Anti-Christ. And it has a purpose: If we cannot distinguish and discern the difference between the two, it is possible to be drawn away from the Spirit of Jesus and drawn towards the Spirit of the Anti-Christ. Testing the Spirits requires four things from us. We see them 1 John 4:1-6.

*Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. <sup>2</sup> This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,<sup>3</sup> but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. <sup>4</sup> You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. <sup>5</sup> They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup> We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.*

### Testing the Spirits Requires:

#### 1. Constructive Skepticism (1)

- **The Duck Principle:** If it looks like a duck. If it quacks like a duck. If it waddles like a duck. Then it is most likely a duck. That's what happens when you do practice constructive skepticism and discernment. You must test the Spirits.
- **How to Have It:** (1) John begins with two commands. One negative and one positive. Do not believe every spirit. John knows what he's talking about. Look no further than Judas Iscariot. He disguised himself as a messenger of light because evil cannot function without the appearance of nobility. Instead, we must test the Spirits. The word "test" comes from a Greek word that means "to put on a scale." This was done in the ancient world to test the purity of metals. We must do the same in a spiritual sense because there are two spirits present and always at work among the people of God: The Spirit of God and the Spirit of this Present Darkness. One sows wheat, the other tares. One breeds sheep, the other goats. One produces disciples who love the truth even when it hurts. The other produces people who, like Judas, want to be surrounded by truth because they are hostile to it and hope they can change the script.
- **Why to Have It:** (1) "Because many false prophets have gone out into the world." They always have and they always will. Jeremiah had one who tried to compete with him in his day. His name was Hananiah. He said: "thus saith the Lord" like Jeremiah. He performed symbolic acts like Jeremiah. He prophesied Babylonian captivity like Jeremiah. But the difference is Hananiah prophesied Babylonian captivity was only going to last two years. The people liked this very much. Jeremiah said it's going to last 70 years. People wanted to kill him. One was right. One was wrong. One said "thus saith the Lord." The other actually knew what the Lord saith. Test the spirits.
- **App:** You are never called to develop a critical spirit. But you are called to develop a constructive critically thinking spirit. It happens when you hear others through the ears of the Scriptures.

#### 2. Constructive Recognition (2-3)

- **The Masked Singer:** (1) The objective is to try to figure out who the singer is behind the mask because it's someone famous. (2) When watching some years ago, as soon as the singer started singing, I turned to my wife and said: "that's Donnie Osmond." She said: "How in the world do you know that's Donnie Osmond?" To which I responded: Because when I was younger, I loathed the Osmond Show so much that my mom made me listen to her Donnie Osmond record when I got into trouble. (2) Though the devil likes to wear a disguise, he still sounds the same way as he did in the Garden. Fortunately for us, the voice of Jesus never changes either.

- **How to Recognize the Spirit of Christ:** (1) In John's World: (a) He says: "by this you will recognize." A better translation is "by this you will know." That word "know" is important in light of the next phrase: "every spirit who recognizes/knows Jesus has come in the flesh is from God." Don't forget that the Gnostics claimed to have a special "knowledge." And that special knowledge was Jesus did not come in the flesh because they considered the flesh evil. He only came as a spirit. John says, essentially, where you here Jesus proclaimed as the incarnate, Son of the Living God, there you will hear the Spirit of Christ. (2) In Our World: That's a pretty important statement because we tend to think our particular faith tradition has the market on the Gospel cornered. Wherever you hear Jesus proclaimed that's consistent with how Jesus is presented by himself and by the apostles, that is the Spirit of Christ.
- **How to Recognize the Spirit of the Anti-Christ:** (1) In John's World: John juxtaposes beside the false one to teach us how Every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus has come in the flesh is not from God. Then he adds: "this is the Spirit of the Anti-Christ" who is coming and is now already in the world. (2) In Our World: What an important statement! It means that the people of God must understand the "spirit" of the Anti-Christ isn't just something that will affect the People of God in an eschatological way in the future. It's here right now. It was in Galatia when they preached a false Gospel of Legalism. And in Corinth when they did the opposite and preached license. And in Ephesus when they left their first love. And in Pergamum when they put stumbling blocks before the people. And in Thyatira when they tolerated the wicked Spirit of Jezebel. And in Sardis when they were asleep in the light. And in Laodicea when they were lukewarm.
- **App:** Counterfeit experts don't spot a fraud by studying the frauds. They spot one by studying the real thing. That's constructive recognition.

### 3. Constructive Knowledge (4)

- **The Two Schnauzers:** (1) We have two Schnauzers: One is named Kyzer. Kyzer sounds like a cultured, intelligent, and obedient dog and indeed he is. The other, however, is named Melvin. Melvin sounds mischievous. He is. Melvin sounds disobedient. He is. And the name Melvin, for a dog, sounds unintelligent. He is not. (2) Both see the same doors open. Kyzer knows what will happen if he bolts through the door without permission. Melvin does too but he does it anyway. (3) Knowledge, to be effective, must be constructive.
- **Comes From Knowing Who You Are:** (1) John tells us in v4: "you are from God." That's a state of being and has two direct implications: (a) God's spirit inside testifies to God's Spirit inside. John's audience knew they were from God because they knew John was and vice versa. To see this in action, try humming Amazing Grace loudly in a foreign airport. Many folks who don't speak your language will hum back and then hug you. (b) A being verb doesn't do. It receives. You are from God. You are on the receiving end of who He is.
- **Comes From Knowing How to See Yourself:** (1) He continues: "And you have overcome them" (i.e., Spirit of the Anti-Christ) because "greater is He who is in you than He who is in the world." (2) That's a verse to commit to memory. Both parts of it. (A) You have overcome is perfect tense. That means the action started in the past and will continue into the future. The Christian life now is not walking towards victory. It's victory now. And will continue to be that way when we see our Ultimate Victor, Jesus Christ. (B) Because greater is He in me than he who is in the world. That's always been true. Look no further than Gideon. Shrink the army down from 33,000. Then down from 10,000. Then down to just 300 who drink water with their hand and keep their eyes forward – instead of like a dog – against a multitude of Midianites. It should be no problem for you to do this because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.
- **App:** There's a difference between knowledge and constructive knowledge because constructive knowledge is wisdom. Knowledge sees the quicksand. Wisdom walks around it. Knowledge knows what to say. Wisdom knows whether to say it or not. Knowledge learns of God. Wisdom loves Him.

### 4. Constructive Listening (5-6)

- **Stand by Me, the Movie:** (1) My favorite character in that movie is Vern. He's the most fearful child in the history of cinema. One night, he's appointed as the nightwatchmen. He's armed with a gun and a set of rabbit ears. (2) If the owl so much as hoos, Vern might be behind the tree. But his gun sure isn't. (2) That's constructive listening.
- **Who The World Will Listen To:** John really likes to contrast the worldly viewpoint with a Christian. Here those contrasting value systems are centered around the word "listen." If the world values the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life, they will listen to "anti-Christ" who have the same value system. Ahab was like this. When the King of Aram threatened both Israel and Judah, Jehoshaphat went to Ahab and said "is there a prophet who will prophecy victory? To which Ahab responded: "There is one we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophecies anything good about me, always bad." Ahab is like a lot of people in the church. Spiritual enough to think of God. But foolish enough desire a word from the Lord to be shaped by what they want that word to be. How dangerous.
- **Who We Must Listen To:** Whoever knows God listens to us. "Us" here represents the apostles and their message and only that message. Here's why that's important: Everything within a religious/Christian context outside of the boundaries of the apostolic confession (and the NT is the source of that confession) comes from the Spirit of the Anti-Christ. Consequently, when the apostles speak, we listen. When they say forgive as the Lord has forgiven you, you listen. When they say put away your deeds of darkness and behave as if in the daylight, you listen. When they say we are a victorious people, not a conquered people, we listen.
- **App:** The most used phrase of the OT and NT prophets is this: "he who has to ear, let him hear." It's the call to test the Spirits that the Lord has in mind for us today. We must be prepared to distinguish light from darkness, truth from error, best from better, righteousness from unrighteousness, purity from defilement, and principles from pragmatics. If not now, then when? If not you, then who? For where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.