

**“Real Jesus for Real Discernment”**

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1 John 4:1-6

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Our text recalls what seems to be a tug of war match going on in this church. Remember, some came in to mislead the church, saying that Jesus was not really God in the flesh.

So here in this church, some have come in to teach false things, things different from what the apostles, including John, have been teaching, things different from the Gospels. So John tells them in v. 1, *don't believe, or give credence to, every spirit. But rather, v. 1, test the spirits* to see where they come from, to see if they are indeed from, or of, God or whether they are false. Like today, the Greco-Roman world was filled with would be prophets, communicating some knowledge that will lead into an abundant life. Behind every prophet who teaches stands some spirit. John says, “Don't believe everything you hear.”

So, the need to test is clear, but how? What demarcates truth and error?

*4 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.*

Everybody is an expert, but some are really experts. Did you know that the state of New York will certify someone as an official coffee taster, a cupper? I read a while ago of one man who has been certified by the state of NY, who can taste a cup of coffee, just one sip while blindfolded and tell you its origin—specifically. For example, he can discern the coffee comes from Guatemala, but also which state in Guatemala from which it comes! He has excellent discernment about coffee. Some of us can simply tell whether a cup of coffee is Folgers or Starbucks. But others have honed their discernment.

John calls us to develop discernment in this passage, to develop a truth palate. And the truth palate is connected to doctrine. Here is the secret: we all are theologians; we all develop doctrine. We are developing our attitudes about what is real, what is ultimate, what is true all the time, from the spirit of the age, or some other input. Even those who say “I don't think all this talk about doctrine is important; how we live is what is important” is *itself* a doctrinal, theological statement. Even saying something like, “We can't really know the truth; all we have is our perspective. So no need to be so arrogant as to develop these truth tests,” again is a doctrinal statement, a claim to know the truth...that truth is unknowable and elusive. We all listen to and have a set of doctrine in our lives. The question is to which voice are we listening. What is shaping our hearts, and how can we tell truth from error?

John wraps it up for us in v. 2 and 6, *By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.* Not everyone who claims to speak for God actually does. *This morning we'll look at How we discern, and What Power is at work within us.*

**1, How do we discern the truth?**

The specific test is verse 2, *By this you know the Spirit of God*, or we could translate as the NIV does, “*This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God.*” John gives us a yardstick to measure. That measure to recognize the Spirit of God as distinguished from some other spirit: acknowledging “*Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.*” This is a statement with implications.

Christ “has come” meaning he was with the Father in the beginning. He is not created, has always existed. He has come to us, being sent from the Father with a redemptive purpose. The tense is perfect here, meaning an event happened in the past with enduring effect. So, hear closely, to those who taught that the Divine came on the man Jesus and then left

him as a man, this says NO. Jesus is fully God and fully man, and it matters. He came “in the flesh” in that he became a true man, he was Incarnate. He took flesh, yet without a sinful nature. That Jesus is God, so he can save us by bearing the weight of the wrath of God on our behalf, and Jesus is man, so he can stand as a true substitute, having kept the commands of God perfectly for men and women, in our place. What do you do with Jesus? That is the test.

This is more than simply a doctrinal test. It is calling us to see the authority behind teaching, whether it is of the Spirit of God or not. The question John is answering is How do we recognize the ministry of the Spirit of God? The answer is By asking whether Christ, the God man is exalted. THIS is the job of the Spirit, throughout the Bible, to lift up, exalt, glorify and make Christ known. Jesus, in Gospel of John 15 clarifies what the Spirit does: *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 again in John 16 the same.*

That is what the Spirit of God does. He exalts Jesus. So, if ministry does some other thing, we must doubt its source; this is John’s message. It seems in vogue to call a ministry powerful if the leader is charismatic, or intelligent, or able to connect, or smooth, a crackerjack leader, or some other dynamic. Perhaps we crave the same recognition for any of our service of others: fame, approval, acclaim. But those outward measures are not what indicates a Spirit led ministry and life; rather, passage and others tell us the ministry that is of the Spirit of God is whether Jesus is lifted up. We tend to celebrate too much of ministry in the evangelical world especially. But the Spirit filled ministry is one that makes Jesus and his work famous, not the messenger famous. What are you looking for? A dynamic speaker, or a dynamic Jesus?

Beginning in v. 4, John takes a turn: from the test itself of the teachers toward the audience. He calls us to see:

## 2. The Power at Work within Us

Beginning in v. 4, John help us see how the Spirit of God helps us. **What is the role of the Spirit in our lives as John lays it out here?** First, the Spirit of God helps us identify and battle the lies of antichrist, v. 4. He opens our eyes and helps us see the truth that Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, truly is with us. He came for us to save us by giving himself for us. We need him to help us battle the lies of the evil one because they are so enticing and entrapping.

Are there not circumstances when you feel alone, isolated, powerless, overwhelmed and wonder does God even notice? Does God even care? The Holy Spirit in those moments works to shine the light on Jesus’s work for us.

Let me give you another little secret: pastors need this work of the Spirit, too. It is very easy for me, this week in fact, to see compounding problems and be led to believe I am alone in this struggle. Pastors are people too. And I deal with doubt, with fears, crippling fear, with anger against God; I have been really angry with him this week. Left to myself, I am blinded to see Jesus in this mess with me. I hear the accusations, too. You really blew it this week, Dad. What you said didn’t help those people at all. You couldn’t lead your way out of a paper sack. That sermon, stunk to high heaven. And many of those things are true. But what the Spirit helps us to see and hear is the beauty of the Gospel, that Jesus knows who we are, and loves us with a costly, cross shaped love and the Spirit uses us when we exalt Jesus. You, too. And he will never let us go. How about you? But for the Spirit of God. That’s part of his role. To helps us see, feel, hear, identify the truth of who Jesus is in our lives when circumstances scream something different.

His role also, v. 4, is to indwell us in his power that is greater than the evil one’s power in this world. His greatness and power in us as the children of God is present to help us fight when we want to give up and give in to the desires of the flesh. He powerfully resides within us as we fight that lawlessness and John labels it in chapter 3, that deep-seated attitude of rebellion to live how we want because God can’t be trusted with our lives. We battle against that feeling of having to take care of ourselves because God is not interested in our joy.

Here’s how he puts it. In verse 4 he says, *you are from God and have overcome them.* The “You” are Christians, those who are of God, being his children as he said before. “Them” references the false prophets and their lies spurred on by the evil one. You have overcome. Why? Because of the Spirit of truth from verse 6. *The one, the Spirit, in v. 4 in you, is greater than the one (devil) in them, the false ones.*

The reason is we, that is, those who believe in Jesus—God in the flesh for us, is not that Christians are so smart or clever, not that we are so good to have seen the light. Really, the opposite is true. We receive the truth, embrace it and live according to--it to the degree which we do--because the Spirit is active within us as a people.

We believe because the Spirit enables us to believe, the Spirit overcomes the lies of the one who would oppose Jesus' reign and rule that lodge in our hearts. We are called to the very doorstep of humility. We believe because the Spirit enables. Our eyes are opened because of the Spirit. We don't give in because the Spirit won't give up on his children. We hang on, and hang in there because the Spirit has an unrelenting grip on us. This gives us tremendous reason to continue to pray for and extend ourselves in love to friends, family, neighbors who don't yet know Jesus. His Spirit has the power to change hearts! Don't give up.

But let's not suppose this "overcoming" is a pain free task, lies easily confronted, rebellion in our hearts simply subdued. The word John uses, "overcome" is only used by John in the perfect form in the NT, and used in John 16, in 1 John 2 and here. In the Gospel of John 16:33, Jesus is the one who says to his disciples, "In this world you will have tribulation, but take heart. I have overcome the world." That statement is truly baffling. On the eve of his unjust arrest on trumped up charges, facing brutal physical suffering he knew was coming, walking willingly into an alienation and separation from his Father never experienced before or since...entering all that struggle and effort and pain, he says confidently, he has overcome.

The confidence Jesus expresses there is a bedrock trust in God's will to control things even at their worst. His sovereign rule is real and true when it looks like things are coming apart. He has overcome.

The way the word is used here is similar. John says we overcome too, but not by our strength or wits. John does not deny our sins and failures and neither should we...to love, to give ourselves and things away as we saw last week, our failure to believe, to live faithfully according to his commandments. But here is the point. **Our confidence in overcoming these things and the lies of the evil one never rests on OUR performance, but on Jesus's life, death on the cross in our place and his resurrection. And that same resurrection power is alive and at work in you and me right now!** We have a struggle-filled, hard fought and often failing, at times feeling weary and hopeless AND yet triumphant "overcoming" in our lives because of the power and strength of the Spirit within us, who is greater than the evil one in this world. Even when things are exceedingly hard, the promise is that the One who overcomes indwells us! We have access to his power.

I don't know if we have any Tolkien fans here...a few of us nerds, maybe. But in the Hobbit, near the end of the story, Bilbo, Gandalf and the Dwarves are emerging from the Lonely Mountain and find themselves spit out onto a craggy cliff. Orcs and wolves are behind. Nothing but sheer drop ahead...and a tall evergreen. This was surely the minute when it all fell apart. There simply was no escape. No opportunity to overcome the evil that stood against them. Maybe you've felt there in your life—maybe even now. Wolves, evil and danger behind. Certain death and free fall ahead.

Then, cue the music, the change of perspective to look upon their plight from above AND...the eagles showed up. The swoop down and grasp this desperate and fighting for their lives bunch with their giant claws to deliver them to safety. What looked like a catastrophe, an unravelling of their lives in tragedy, was actually as Tolkien later wrote, a eucatastrophe, a word Tolkien made up, a *eu* (Greek for good) *catastrophe* (unravelling). A eucatastrophe is when things seem like they can't get any worse, circumstances any bleaker, when all seems lost, THEN hope rises. That's eucatastrophe. When Jesus proclaimed to those disciples, I have overcome, he stared down a eucatastrophe. When you stare down a life falling apart, a battle with sin you fear you are losing, hopelessness for any change...life is ripe for a eucatastrophe, an overcoming by the power of the spirit of God! In you and for you. And in others around us.

Calvin said: "by Christ's power we fight and are furnished with God's weapons, we even by fighting and striving become conquerors. As to the main subject of this passage, it is a great consolation, that with whatever wiles Satan may assail us, we shall stand through the power of God."

Friends, the easy thing is to have our life curve in on themselves when we feel shamed and defeated. But John offers us this tool of discernment to encourage us to lift our eyes off of ourselves on to others around us, looking for a particular thing. We know Jesus is real, the truth is real—even when we have a hard time believing--when we see God at work in others. **He overcomes in us!** When we see the people around us battling valiantly against sickness, it encourages our own fight. When we see others fighting bitterness, it encourages our own doesn't it, especially if we feel powerless to deal with it. Whenever we see the Spirit of God overcoming sin in another's life it helps us to believe that perhaps he will do the same for me, too. In this way we teach one another; we model for one another that Jesus is alive here!

So, what do you see? Are you developing an expert palate for discerning and seeing Jesus alive and at work? Look for Christ to lift your heart toward hope.