

(1 John #22) Testing 1,2,3,4

by J. Glyn Owen

J. Glyn Owen emphasizes the importance of testing teachings against the truth of Scripture to discern false prophets from those who speak by the Spirit of God.

Duration: 30:39

Scripture: Matthew 22:39, John 13:35, 2 Peter 2:1, 1 John 4:1-3, 1 John 4:5

Topics: "Testings"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the conflict between the church, which is indwelt by the Spirit of God, and the world, which is indwelt by the Spirit of error. The preacher emphasizes the importance of knowing how to test the spirits to determine if someone is speaking from God or not. The first guideline given is to see if the person confesses Jesus as having come in the flesh. This is a crucial factor in discerning if someone is speaking from God or the devil. The preacher shares an example of testing this guideline by visiting the Unification Church and asking them about their belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

Transcript

Close our eyes for a moment of prayer as we prepare ourselves to listen to the Word of God. Spirit of God who wrote this eternal Word and who indwells each of us who knows Jesus, may the Word which you have written find the response of our hearts and infiltrate our minds that we may do that which is acceptable in your sight. We ask it for the glory of Jesus himself.

Amen. Some of you may have heard these words if you've listened to any radio stations, particularly those which emanate from south of the border. This is a test.

For the next 60 seconds, this station is participating in a test of the civilian early warning system. Then a few seconds later, the same voice says, thank you. This has been a test and repeats the same words.

Now, we as Christians are called to involve ourselves in some testing. And although it's probably unwise to broadcast that we're doing it, God called us, and specifically in this passage this morning, to test the spirits to see whether they are of him or whether they come from someplace else. And I want us to continue in our study of 1 John this morning by looking at the passage which comes in chapter 4, which I read a few minutes ago, to try to understand what God is commanding us to do and to ask him to show us from his word how we can obey that commandment.

So if you've got a Bible or you're sitting next to someone who has, turn with me, will you please, to chapter 4 of 1 John and let's look at it together. John begins by saying, Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God. For many false prophets have gone out into the world.

That's the commandment and part of the reason why he gives it. And then the rest of the verse gives some guidelines of how we can test the spirits to see whether indeed they are of God. But before we can even get into those guidelines and look at them in a helpful way, I think it's important to clear the ground a little bit, to make sure that some misconceptions which may be in some of our minds are swept away so that I'm speaking the same language that you're hearing.

The first misconception is this word spirit as John uses it here. He says, test the spirits to see whether they are of God. He's not speaking of disembodied spirits or dealing with speaking to the dead or anything like that, which is prohibited elsewhere in scripture.

But as he makes clear, as he goes on to talk about false prophets, John is speaking of those who are representing not the spirit of God, but the spirit of error. So what we're testing here is not disembodied spirits that people may be tempted to try to contact in ways prohibited by scripture, but those spirits which provide the message of false prophets. That's the first misconception I think we ought to clear up.

Second is that this passage is not simply instruction for those who are seeking to exercise the spiritual gift of discernment. Now anyone who has that gift should exercise it in keeping with this passage. But as most of you probably know, in 1 Corinthians 12, in the midst of that list of spiritual gifts, one of them that's mentioned is the gift of spiritual discernment.

And the key thing to understand about spiritual gifts is that not everyone has all of them. Some people have one or more. Others have others.

This passage is not to individual Christians who have that particular gift, but to all of us. Beloved, John begins his passage. He's speaking to everyone who reads the letter.

All of us have to exercise the responsibility of distinguishing between those who speak out of the spirit of error and those who speak by the spirit of truth. Third misconception I think we ought to make sure we're clear about is that this isn't the only test of whether or not someone is a Christian, or whether someone speaks by the spirit of God. The whole book, as you've been studying it together for these months, makes it clear that there are other tests.

There's a moral test. No one who keeps on sinning or who makes sin a practice in his life could possibly be of God, because people who are reborn by the spirit of God have lives which aren't characterized by sin. They're characterized by righteousness.

And there's a social test. No one who fails to love his brother or hates his brother consistently can be born of the spirit of God, because the spirit of God enables us to love. So this isn't the only test, and we need to apply it with that in mind, not rigidly or narrowly, but seeing it in the larger context of the whole of Scripture.

And then last, in my little ground-clearing exercise, the primary application of this passage is to dealing with what we might call Christian heresies. When John wrote this to the young believers, he wasn't telling them how to deal with outright pagan beliefs, although there's an application there. He's trying to help them understand how to deal with those who claim to be Christian, who are setting themselves forward as prophets of the one true God, and yet prove by what they say not to be.

So with that bit of ground-clearing, perhaps we can look at the commandment itself. Look at verse 1 with me again, will you please? The commandment is in two parts, a negative part and a positive part. First, negatively, do not believe every spirit.

The temptation which faced those young Christians, and if anything is even more rampant now in our generation, was to think more of the manner of delivery or the manner of expression than of the content of what was said. See, some of these people who claim to be representing God claim to be prophets of God, spoke in a way their utterances were accompanied by claims, thus saith the Lord, or they spoke in perhaps a quavering voice or in some other way which was supposed to indicate that they were speaking from God. And the temptation is with today.

People say, I've got a word from the Lord, and some Christians automatically assume that whatever that person then says is indeed a word from God. John says, don't be so gullible. Don't believe every spirit.

Just because someone says, I've had a word from the Lord, it doesn't mean that he necessarily has had a word from the Lord. Or just because someone is using the kind of language that we expect a born again person to use, that doesn't mean that what he's saying is a word from God. So don't be gullible.

Some of you who are sociologists, or maybe some of the rest of you, have heard of what sociologists call the halo effect. By that they mean someone will say, be an expert in one area of life, and when he speaks on another area of life, even though he may know absolutely nothing about it, people, gullible people like ourselves, accept what he says, even though he has no real authority or basis for saying so. It's used in advertising all the time, when someone who's good at something speaks about something else which he may know nothing about.

And the advertisers hope that because he's thought to be knowledgeable in one area, everyone will take his word for something in another. Now Christians are guilty of believing people for the very same reason, and maybe the term halo effect is more applicable in our situation than some of the others. We listen to someone who we know is right in some areas, even though what he says in others isn't accurate.

We as Christians are not to be gullible. We're not to believe every spirit, but as the Apostle Paul tells us, we're to test all things and hold fast to that which is good. So that's the negative side of the commandment.

The positive side, as John puts it here, is test the spirits to see whether they are of God. And in the rest of the passage, he tells us how to do that. But before I look at those guidelines which he gives us, let's look at the last part of verse one, because it tells us something of why.

Why do we do this? Why is it important that we test the spirits? Well, in the first place, he says, for many false prophets have gone out into the world, and I would add, and some of them have ended up in Toronto. In fact, we don't have to go very far, just less than a quarter of a mile down the street to visit the Unification Church in Toronto. Just two or three blocks in this direction where the Hare Krishna movement have their own headquarters or one of their outposts, at least.

False prophets have gone out into the whole world, and some of them are here. And not just a few of them. They're plentiful.

There are loads of people who are propagating ideas which don't come from Scripture and which we are to reject. So that's one reason, and it's an important one, not only because of the damage they can do to

us as those who believe in Jesus, but because of the damage they can do to others. But not only are these false prophets plentiful, we could say that these false prophets aren't working on their own.

They're not individual people who've gotten together just for their own gain, to build up some kind of a cult, to feather their own nest, although sadly and predictably, that's often part of the motivation. These people, John tells us, are in league with someone else. Look at verse 3. Every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God.

This is the spirit of Antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already. What John is saying clearly in this passage and comes out through the rest of Scripture is that we're involved in a tremendous conflict. When we as Christian believers come face to face with someone who is teaching lies, teaching error, it's not just two people confronting each other.

It's not a simple difference of opinion. There are two kingdoms in conflict. On the one hand, the kingdom of God with Jesus as our king and our leader, and on the other hand, the kingdom of Satan with the Antichrist leading them.

Not only do we have the Holy Spirit on the one hand, the spirit of truth, but on the other hand, there's a spirit of error, truth against error, light against dark. The church, those who believe the spirit of God and are indwelt by him, and the world, those who are indwelt by the spirit of error, and these two are in conflict. So when we have contact with those who prove to be false prophets, we're not just dealing with individual people working on their own or speaking out of their own minds, but they're being led by the spirit of error.

These two worlds are locked in conflict. So that makes it imperative that we know what we're talking about. We need to know how to test the spirits.

If it's more than just my opinion against someone else's. So John has obligingly given us four good guidelines, four clear rules, four ways of determining whether someone is speaking of God or not. And his purpose in this passage, as in the whole book, is to give us confidence, to help us as we confront people who have these kinds of opinions to know what they're saying, to know what they're up to.

So if you're taking note, there are going to be four of these guidelines. And the first one is this. Does this person confess Jesus? Look at verses two and three.

By this you know the spirit of God. Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God. That's straightforward.

But just to make sure, he states it the other way. And every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is central, basic, and should be right at the top of any list of trying to determine if someone is speaking from God or speaking from the devil.

Probably the clearest account of the Holy Spirit's job description is that he is someone who glorifies Jesus. That's his job. That's his purpose.

That's the main reason he came into the world, to give glory to Jesus, to testify to Jesus, so that someone who has the spirit of God within him will automatically and inevitably give glory to Jesus and point to him as the Christ who's come in the flesh. And as Paul said in 1 Corinthians, nobody who has the spirit of God can say Jesus be cursed. On the other hand, those who do not confess Jesus, those who do not have him central in their thinking and in their preaching, John says here, are not of God, because they don't have

the Holy Spirit, because that's what the Holy Spirit does.

Now, verse 2 has been translated a number of different ways, but I think we need to look at it in detail, because John had in mind a specific kind of heresy, a gnostic heresy, which said that the spiritual world can have nothing to do with the physical or material world. And then these two or three words here, he points a double barrel shotgun right at those heretics, and he wants to make it clear to his readers that what they believe can't come from the spirit of God. I think it's best translated that we've got to believe, when we confess Jesus, not simply to use his name, or not even simply to say he is Messiah without knowing what that means, but to confess that Jesus, the historical man, is the eternal Christ and the Son of God, as he says in verse 15, who has come in the flesh.

That this being is not simply Jesus, a historical man, on whom this eternal spirit dipped down and touched at a portion of his life, but the human historical Jesus and the eternal Christ are one and inseparable. And that this person lived and walked the earth. Jesus is the Christ who has come in the flesh.

Now, this is tremendously helpful when we're talking with people that we suspect don't come from God, because, you see, this guideline works both ways. Those who do not confess Jesus are touched by it as well. A few years ago, and I don't know whether they still put their message in these terms or not, but those who were propagating transcendental meditation or various kinds of yoga would say this particular belief or system or way of acting is neutral theologically, that it doesn't say anything about God.

It's simply a way of improving your own religion, whatever that may be. If you're a Christian, it'll make you a better Christian. If you're something else, it'll make you better at that.

And I understand that they have been taken to court in the States because that's a blatant lie. When we look at what they ask people to do, they give them a mantra to learn, a little phrase which they repeat again and again, which when translated is nothing less than worship of pagan deities. But if we had properly applied this kind of test and seen earlier on that Jesus wasn't at the center of their message, that they didn't confess Jesus, and that word means more than acknowledge, we would have known that they weren't of God, that those kind of cults, Scientology and others, cannot simply be a way of improving what we know about Christ and improving our relationship to him, because they don't confess Jesus.

They don't commit themselves to him, as the wording implies. Now, this is a slippery guideline because we live in a generation when, unfortunately, people use words in slippery ways. This week, I walked down the street to the Unification Church, armed with a little list of these guidelines, just to see how they worked out in practice.

And I asked the people there several things, and one of them was, what did they think about Jesus? Did they feel that he was the Messiah come in the flesh? And they said, yes. And I think I could have been satisfied if I didn't know a bit more about the group and about the movement. But I began to ask a few more questions and discovered that they think, although they're willing to use those words, Messiah come in the flesh, even Son of God, they believe that Jesus was a failure, that his whole ministry ended in failure.

Now, whatever words they may try to use to describe Jesus, if they believe he was a failure, it's clear that they don't believe in the same Jesus that we believe in. So, what I'm urging you to do is, when you apply these guidelines, be cautious. Ask the Spirit of God to help you press on, pass the word sometimes to the truth which lies beneath them.

So, that's the first guideline. What does this person, does this person confess Jesus? Second guideline is, where does the person in question get his message? Look at verse 5, the first part of the verse. They are of the world.

Therefore, what they say is of the world. It's as simple as that. These people don't come from God, they come from the world.

They're indwelt by the Spirit of the world, and they get their message from the world. And when we begin looking around at the various cults which have sprung up in the past years, we see that that's exactly what happens. The Mormons have the Book of Mormon, and the Pearl of Great Price, and other books.

The Christian scientists have science and health with a key to scriptures. Although it's always struck me as having a great deal of gall to take a book which had to go to several editions because of errors within it, and say that it itself was a key to the eternal and infallible Word of God. Or the Unification Church, which has their divine principle as the source of their information.

Or the Scientologists, who get their information from books by L. Ron Hubbard. Or some may point to the Jehovah's Witnesses, who would claim at least that scripture itself is their source of information. And then we discover on looking closer that it's their own translation of scripture which they use, and how they have twisted some of the important passages in it.

So that's the second guideline. Where does this person get his message? If he gets it from some book other than the Bible, we need immediately to be suspect. But there's a third guideline which comes in the second part of verse 5, and it's this.

Who listens to his message? First, does the person confess Jesus? Second, where does he get his message? Third, who listens to his message? Last part of verse 5 says, and the world listens to them. And let's be clear about this. I don't think John is saying here that the cults, or those who are claiming to be prophets of God and are not, get their adherence from some part of culture, or some part of the population of the world which is excessively depraved, or which has particular problems.

I asked the representative of the Unification Church who their message appealed to, where most of their converts came from, and he said all kinds of people. And of course we would say exactly the same. Christian gospel appeals to all kind of people, and indeed we should have in our congregation every kind of person imaginable, every psychological background, every kind of personal background.

The point really here, I think, is does their message appeal to the world as opposed to the church? See, John is again using this category, these two categories, which he repeats all the way through the book. Light and darkness, those who are of God and those who are not of God, and the church, those who know God, as opposed to the world, and they're only those two categories. So what we want to do when we apply this guideline is ask where do the people come from in the sense of are Christians appealed to by this kind of teaching? And it may be overstating it, but my experience is that there are very few people in these cults who've had a clear conversion experience, who have been deeply and meaningfully grounded in the Word of God, and who've had a meaningful relationship with the people of God.

Now sadly that's not to say that there's never anyone from an evangelical church who've been involved, who've listened to these people. But it is to say that when we really know God, and when the Spirit of God is working in us and producing the fruits of a knowledge of God, then it will be clear to us when we hear

these people that they're not of God. His Spirit, which who bears witness to us what is of God, will also tell us when something isn't of God.

Maybe I can illustrate this slightly from history. In about 1831, a group called the Plymouth Brethren was formed. Now some people at the time may have said this was a splinter group trying to break away from the rest of the church, and yet if we look at it, although we may not be in total sympathy with some of their theological ideas or some of their ideas about church structure, one thing is very certain.

These people confessed Jesus. He was central to their message. They didn't get their message from any other source except the Bible, and in fact it was from the Bible that they wanted, because of their understanding of the Bible, that they did what they did.

And to emphasize my point in this third guideline, the people who listened to their message were Christians, were believers. That's completely different from what's happened in more recent years in some groups where cults have started up, and those who have been drawn to it have been either from outside the Christian church or from the ranks of nominal Christianity. So those three guidelines, and then a fourth.

Does this person receive the biblical message? Look at verse six. John writes, We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us.

Now that may sound like the height of arrogance until we understand what John is actually saying. Let's be clear. He's not here giving us the license to say, I am of God, I know what's right, and anyone who disagrees with me is wrong.

We misinterpret it if we read it that way. The key to understanding this verse is to know who the we is. This is John the apostle speaking, and when he speaks of we and of us twice, and the context there, he's speaking of the apostles.

He's saying we who are apostles speak what is true, because we were specially commissioned by Jesus himself to recall his teaching and to receive new revelation which became the rest of the New Testament. So we can't go out into the streets and say, well if you agree with me you're right, but if you don't you're wrong. But we do have license and commandment to test people by their reaction to the biblical message.

We need to find out how they respond to what John and the rest of the apostles wrote, because anyone who has the spirit of God understands the word of God. It rings bells with him, it rings true with him. Again, I asked this fellow at the Unification Church what he thought of the Bible, what he thought of the scriptural message.

He said it's just not clear. Couldn't be, or there wouldn't be so many differences of opinion about it, and he said in effect that's why we started this group. And I thought that fitted in very well into the pattern of everything else he'd been saying.

Without the spirit of God he wasn't able to see what scripture was saying, and indeed it wasn't clear to him. So what's to be our attitude as we live in a world where there are many false prophets, and where those false prophets represent the Antichrist himself? Well I want you to remember two words from the passage. We're to be critical, and yet we're to be confident.

Critical not of ourselves, because by these tests I hope we can see that as if we are truly born again believers, we do confess Jesus, and he's central. We do get our message from the Bible, and everything

else that we read or think needs to come under the judgment of scripture. People who listen to the message, we are those who listen to the message, and we know we're of God, and we receive the whole biblical message as it is.

But critical of those who for some reason or another don't adhere to these guidelines. We're to ask, does this person really confess Jesus, really commit himself to Jesus? Not simply the word or some idea which he may have, but the biblical Jesus. Does he drive a wedge between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith? That's a wedge which scripture itself doesn't allow, a two or one.

Does this person, where does he get his message? We don't have to listen to these false prophets very long until we discover that the real source of their message, whatever they may say about the Bible, is something else. And what about those who listen to his message? Are they genuinely born again people who've known the Lord, known the word, and known the fellowship of his people? Are they outsiders or merely nominal believers? And what do they think of the biblical message? What do they think of the Bible as God has given it to us? But not only are we to be critical, we're to be confident, not in a proud or boasting way, but in a quiet and yet powerful way. For the very reason which John gives us in this passage, look at verse four.

Little children, you are of God. Some of you may have thought it was presumptuous to sing that hymn we sang earlier in the service, we are on the Lord's side. It's often presumptuous for us to say God is on our side because we sometimes drag him, drag his name into things which he wouldn't associate his name with.

But by the grace of God and by the testimony of his word and his spirit, we can say, as John says here, you are of God. We are of God. We are part of his team.

So we have that confidence. And he goes on to say, and have overcome them for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. So when we run up against people like this, when we discover someone who's teaching false doctrine, we don't need to be afraid.

We don't need to be scared. We need to be armed. We need to be aware of the fact that there are many of these people and that their message comes from the spirit of error.

We need to be armed with guidelines such as I've given you this morning, but we can be confident because the battle doesn't really happen simply between the two of us. It's already happened. Jesus is already the victor.

He has already overcome the world. We're of God, and we can have confidence when we face these people, knowing that he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. Let's just pray as we end our time of thinking together.

Holy Spirit, Heavenly Father, it seems incredible to us that just as we are missionaries of yourself, there are in the same world with us, indeed living on the same street, those who are missionaries of the evil one. We thank you that you have not left us without warning that this would be the case. We praise you that you've given us commandment to test the spirits, and you've given us some guidelines so that we can know how to do that.

We pray that as we come in contact with such people, we may show forth your love and your care, but that we may not be gullible, believing everything and anything, but that we may, by your grace and by your

spirit, discern whether they are of God or whether they are of not. So enable us by your spirit to go forth in confidence, assured that whoever we meet or whoever we confront, he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. We ask it that the kingdom of God may be established and that Jesus, our Lord, may be glorified for his name's sake.

Amen.

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