

**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.

**I. Spiritual Reality** - John continues to draw out the real spiritual dichotomies that there are false prophets coming in the Spirit of Error that are received by the world. While our culture struggles with this reality, there is absolute truth and evil. We must confront our pride and love of comfort to seek the truth.

**II. Discerning the Spirits** - Accordingly, John tells us to test the spirits to know the difference between truth and error in daily theology and practice. This is not a cold impersonal task but one all Christians should do out of love of God and love of others. This is done through Scripture, prayer, and community.

**III. Christ in the Flesh** - The primary lens we use to determine truth and error is that Christ has come in the flesh. Theologies that distort Jesus (Gnosticism) and practices that ignore him as Christ (Egoism) must be rebuked. Jesus Christ came in the flesh and now he reigns over and transforms every aspect of our lives.

- Intro
  - Good afternoon, my name is John Seago, I'm an elder here at City Life Church and excited to bring you this message from God's word today.
  - On social media, we're exposed to endless streams of life advice and pro tips for living your best life. And I read on Instagram that to live your best life, you must rid yourself of burdens that stand in your way to happiness and peace. I was thinking about burdens to my happiness and peace right now and thought of gas prices. So I put a sticky note over my gas gauge in the car because I don't want to spend more money on gas. I'm trying to live my truth and be the master of my happiness and another \$50 gas expense will restrict my good vibes. Enlightened. Well, not looking at my gas gauge may provide some temporary relief or peace but eventually reality is going to catch up with you.
    - Shallow advice and foolish application.
  - Today our passage talks about discerning advice, teachings, messages to weigh if they are in or out of sync with reality and most critical truths we see clearly in scripture.
  - Ignoring reality is not a good idea.

- Today we're going to look at three things from this passage:
  - Spiritual reality
  - The Spirit of truth
  - Christ in the flesh
- **Spiritual Reality** - John continues to draw out the real spiritual dichotomies that there are false prophets coming in the Spirit of Error that are received by the world. While our culture struggles with this reality, there is absolute truth and evil. We must confront our pride and love of comfort to seek the truth.
  - Spirits
    - The Apostle John is writing to first century Christians around the city of Ephesus.
    - John starts chapter 4 with this clear imperative "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits..."
      - This could seem odd, on the surface, when is the last time you were confronted with a spirit asking you to believe it?
      - I for one, don't live in a Harry Potter book where ghosts or magical spirits are often trying to deceive me.
    - No, John's warning here is clear: behind every statement or every message there's a spirit, a spiritual force trying to convince you of something about what is true or good.
    - That seems dramatic doesn't it?
      - But think about it, we're bombarded with advertisements, social media posts, Op-Eds, headlines, podcasts, Instagram rants, making truth claims about who we are, what the purpose of life is, and how we should live.
    - John's point is that all those messages are spiritual in the sense they are either inline with or contrary to spiritual truths and reality. So, they should be tested.
      - John Stott explains that "Neither Christian believing nor Christian living is to be indiscriminate. In particular, Christian faith is not to be mistaken for credulity. True faith examines its object before reposing confidence in it."
    - Christianity is not being superstitious or gullible, and the Christian faith is not vague spirituality, open to any spiritual message or instruction.
    - We realize there is a spiritual realm, and as we've read in John the enemy and those antichrists – working against God's kingdom, are seeking to distract us, cause doubt in the Lord, and push us to self-centered love.
      - The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor explains that modern people today have buffered selves: We imagine ourselves to be insulated from forces outside our rational mind, particularly supernatural or transcendent forces.
      - But we must be mindful of the spiritual reality.
    - This especially applies to messages, advice, or teaching in the

Christian circles. "Christians need to be reminded that demonic activity could penetrate their churches."

- Here at City Life we've unfortunately seen Christians abandon the gospel because of youtube videos that claimed to have deeper insights into the truth and twisted Scripture to support their message.
- Christians must be prudent and know that spiritual activity, spiritual teaching, or message are not necessarily Godly and true.
- dichotomies
  - This idea that every aspect of our daily routine has some spiritual reality to it is consistent with what John has been talking about this whole time.
  - Throughout the book, John has been dealing with dichotomies:
    - Truth and falsehood (2:18-28)
    - Conflict between children of God and children of Satan (2:29-3:12)
    - Conflict between love and hatred (3:13-24)
    - Now, in this passage, verse 6, we see here clear cut distinction between the Spirit of truth and spirit of error.
  - In our passage today, John is making a clear distinction:
    - On one side you have
      - False Teachers
      - Who are from the world
      - They don't believe in Jesus Christ
      - They are received by the world
      - But are motivated by the spirit of error
    - Then we have:
      - True Believers
      - Who are of God
      - They affirm Jesus is Christ
      - They listens to the apostles teaching
      - And have the Spirit of truth.
  - This idea of having clear cut lines, these dichotomies may rub us the wrong way as being too old school religious, outdated way of looking at the world. But our passage has a stark warning for us not to ignore these spiritual realities: The spiritual enemy is real.
    - There does exist spiritual forces that are opposed to God, Jesus Christ and his church.
    - The passage says that Satan, antichrists, and the false teachers are the ones in the world, being received by the world.
- Our culture tries to reject dichotomies, is uncomfortable with clear cut moral absolutes.

- Many have described our culture as being a Post-Truth society.
- Whereas the Bible refers to the truth as that which corresponds with reality. That truth is absolute, universal, and unchanging.
- Many of our neighbors and friends would object to that.
  - This is a result of a long move away from these ideas.
- The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that we cannot know truth, that we only know perspectives of the truth. This is closely related to his insistence that for morality, we must go beyond thinking in terms of good and evil.
- This spirit was picked up in the 20<sup>th</sup> century later by philosopher Jacques Derrida who argued that we must “Deconstruct” these established belief systems like Christianity.
  - He takes primary target at binaries like true/false, being/nonbeing, and good/evil. Says that we must tear down these distinctions we make in language are ultimately used for social power – to control peoples thinking and behavior.
- However, this is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible uses language in a way that assumes it can communicate absolute truths to us and we can understand them and live by them.
- Now, your coworkers or friends may not be quoting neitzsche or derrida on their Instagram, but these ideas have filtered into pop culture where we talk about living your truth, reject claims about moralith, we hear self-care advice that contradicts our commands of scripture.
  - For example, we’re told to cut out those one-sided relationships.
  - Now, obeying scripture is not simple, but we should test that advice to what we just read in 1 John about loving others in a self-sacrificing manner.
- My point is that John is warning us about this spiritual reality that we cannot ignore.
  - Remember, Ignoring the gas gauge doesn’t work.
  - As the American Philosopher Lizzo said, “Truth Hurts.”
- Although we hear objections, that façade breaks in the face of tragic reality. Sometimes there is a sense that absolute claims about right and wrong are possible to make. No one is saying that

Vladimir Putin is just living out his truth by invading Ukraine. You do you, Putin. No, Christians and non-Christian alike feel comfortable seeing the evidence of his actions and declaring he's responsible for unmitigated evil.

- Danger in absolute truth is not abstract but personal.
  - But in regular daily life this objection still persists when we share the gospel and someone says, "yeah, Christianity and church is just not my thing."
- Where are you today when it comes to the Spiritual reality we see throughout the book of 1 John?
  - Are these dichotomies uncomfortable?
  - Do you avoid thinking about or talking about these aspects of the faith?
  - Do you live your daily life attempting to ignore spiritual realities around us?
- **Discerning the Spirits** - Accordingly, John tells us to test the spirits to know the difference between truth and error in daily theology and practice. This is not a cold impersonal task but one all Christians should do out of love of God and love of others. This is done through Scripture, prayer, and community.
  - So, because of this Spiritual reality and the fact that there is an absolute truth, John admonishes all believers to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God."
    - The verb "test" (dokimazete) means "to prove, to examine" like coins that are being tested for genuineness and proper weight – something that should be done on a continual basis.
    - As your Pastors, we do this when we see a popular book pop up in Christian circles or when a specific Christian speaker is coming to town. We'll have people in the church send us a link or a podcast and ask whether we recommend it. That's good, but...
    - The grammar here makes it clear this "testing" is the work of all the believers. Every one of us is called to discern truth from error: "all of you test the spirits."
    - This responsibility for the people of God is not new, but we saw this in the OT.
      - Elijah challenged the false prophets (Baal and prophets and Asherah) in a public competition to prove to the truth of his message and the Lord.
    - Paul also tells the church to carefully evaluate exactly what is said

in spiritual teachings to distinguish between the spirit of truth and error.

- This applies to us at City Life Church, What you hear from us should be tested as well.
- How does the testing work?
  - The reality is you do test what we say, you do determine whether you accept a friend's political position they posted online.
    - The question is what are you testing it with?
    - Sometimes you don't like what you hear in a sermon (and you tell us), but how do we test it?
    - It doesn't match our other beliefs (Jesus is the only way) it requires too much of me (loving others selflessly?), or it would affect your reputation if you held this view (what would my friends think if they knew I believed this)?
  - In Western Culture, we now prioritize the individual as the basic arbiter of truth... [you] search out the truth and verify it yourself.”
    - Testing the spirits is not enough - it matters what you use to test the spirits. In college as a junior studying philosophy, I set out to “test” Christianity on my own terms. I wanted the truth claims to be proven by my criteria or I wasn't going to accept them. I failed miserably and the Lord was gracious to bring me back to faith.
  - John here though, is saying you are not the arbiter of truth, there is actually a Spirit of truth in you that spots error, false teaching, and sin.
  - Our discernment and prudence does not come from within us, it's not because we're the smart ones. No, we have been given the one who is enlightened, the Holy Spirit.
    - Jesus explains in the gospel of John that the Spirit dwells in us and said <sup>12</sup> “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”
  - So, Christians, we have the Holy Spirit, the Helper who will guide us into all truth – what we should believe but also how do we live.
  - This should be a great comfort to us!
    - Are you anxious about talking about these spiritual realities?
    - Do you get nervous when a discussion on social issues come up at work?
    - We can take comfort in this fact we have the Spirit of Truth.
  - Spirit primarily uses Scripture and the church.
    - Verse 6: “Whoever knows God listens to us” – True believers will be faithful to the central message of the gospel passed down in Scripture from the apostles. No additions, subtractions, or de-constructing.
    - Scripture is the content, the substance of how he speaks to

- us and often time he uses the church and community.
  - The Holy Spirit speaks through a city group or discipleship group discussing that struggle with a hard truth or that impossible relationship where you know you're called to love but you're worried its actually an emotionally abusive relationship to be avoided.
  - By praying to the spirit about these struggles, reading scripture, and talking about it in the church – the Spirit of Truth works and gives us real guidance and discernment in complex situations.
- I work in politics, and back in 2019, we just had out legislative session where the state legislature meet for five months and then take a year and half off (classic politicians). And we just finished and I got very little accomplished. I was falsely being blamed for killing a popular bill, we didn't get the results, and it was demoralizing.
  - I had breakfast with my wife and said, I think I'm going to quit this job. I felt called to this job, but obviously its not God's will since things are going so poorly.
  - My wife, very patiently, said, well, the session just ended yesterday. How about we take a month to pray about it before making any decisions.
  - Entirely too reasonable and level-headed for my emotions in that moment. BUT through prayer, reading through the Psalms and talking to several of you, the Spirit of Truth showed me that the Lord was calling me into humility and trial not another job.
- So the Spirit of truth also uses us to speak truth and help others.
  - This is not some cold or harsh thing. Thankfully, my wife didn't just tell me to stop being so dramatic and self-centered.
  - In our passage even when talking about rejecting error and lies with truth, the apostle John does it in love:
    - 4:1 – Calls them “beloved” or “my friends” and in verse 4: “little children.”
  - John “genuinely loves those to whom he is writing, and it is this sentiment that motivates him again to warn them of the dangers to the faith.”
- What dangers was John lovingly warning them of?
  - There were already “many false prophets” among the church and trying to convince them of false gospels.
  - Jesus, Paul, Peter, and Jude all warn against false teachers or false prophets.
  - These false teachers are not just a different brand of church or a different spin on Christianity. John clarifies that they are actually not from God, but the enemy.

- What spirits do you need to test in your life with the Spirit of truth?
  - What authorities, voices, messages are urging you to belief and act in a certain way?
  - Are you taking those into consideration in prayer, scripture reading, and in community?
  
- **Lastly, Christ in the Flesh** - The primary lens we use to determine truth and error is that Christ has come in the flesh. Theologies that distort Jesus (Gnosticism) and practices that ignore him as Christ (Egoism) must be rebuked. Jesus Christ came in the flesh and now he reigns over and transforms every aspect of our lives.
  - So we saw that we have the Spirit of Truth to help us determine truth and error, but John tells us the central criteria for our discernment: Jesus Christ
    - The Spirit helps us test all things using a Christological lens.
    - We are to examine what teachers and messengers believe about Jesus and the gospel.
    - Only those from/with the “Spirit of God” will confess Jesus.
      - So, John says in verse 2, “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup> and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.”
      - This shouldn't be surprising: Jesus is kind of a big deal around here.
      - When doing our Bible study every morning, if they kids don't know an answer they just guess Jesus: Who was in control of the Roman Empire at this time? Jesus? No, well, yes, but not my point.
      - Sorry, just kidding, we shouldn't be surprised that the Spirit of Truth confesses Jesus, because Jesus himself explained that in John 15. He said <sup>26</sup> “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.”
    - This is the heart of our passage: “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God”
    - And look again, not just acknowledging/confessing Jesus in general but specifically what he affirms that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.
    - Affirming that the historical man in flesh and blood, Jesus of Nazareth is God's Christ, his Messiah: this fundamental truth that Christianity stands or falls on.
    - The actuality of the incarnation is not secondary or optional.
      - GOSPEL SUMMARY
        - Creation, Fall, JESUS CHRIST,

- For that to work we have to affirm that Jesus Christ came into the world as fully God and fully man.
    - Some false teaching attack his divinity – Judaism, Islam, Scientology, Jehovah’s Witness.
    - Other false teaching attack Jesus’ humanity
  - And John was battling those heresies about Jesus’ humanity:
    - Docetism: that held that Jesus had two separate natures and the human aspect of his nature was simply imaginary. Jesus was just pretending to be a real human, but cloaked his divinity.
    - Gnosticism: Goes further and says actually, Jesus could not be flesh or material, because all material is evil and all spiritual is good.
- These views fail to profess Jesus and the gospel as depicted in Scripture, they are not of God, but actually the from the Spirit of error.
- Today we have a Hodgepodge of beliefs contradictory and difficult to explain in full, but kind of adopting or rejecting views based on this loose collage.
- We all have thick and thin beliefs.
  - Thin beliefs – not much justification but something we adopted – whether you like Elon Musk or not. For most of us, that opinion is based on some scant pieces of evidence, whether our friends like him, if we’re into space travel, etc.
  - Then we also have thick beliefs – deeply held values that interpret others and could determine if we accept something as true or not. The idea that people are fundamentally sinful and selfish.
  - So when you hear that Elon Musk bought and may be the temporary CEO of twitter and that he wants to promote freedom of speech, you interpret it based on your more sturdy views on how people will abuse the social media platform.
  - This passage should reiterate that our views about Jesus Christ should be the thickest beliefs we have. The most tested, the most sturdy, and the measure we weight every other piece of advice, current event, political movement.
- Hard to do. What is the Christ-centered view of Elon Musk & twitter?
  - Complicated, but a paramount questions should be how does this affect Christ and the gospel?
  - Value of freedom of speech is to share the truth about Jesus and his work.
- But our view of Christ does shape a lot more than you think.
- Look at this “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.”
- The fact that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh means that flesh, bodies, material cannot be evil like the Gnostics asserted. We also see that God himself declared creation to be good, but after the Fall, Christ didn’t

appear to be real, he was real according to the Bible, he cried, he ate, he slept.

- Throughout Christianity this has been critical.
  - So sin, the fall, does not negate the goodness of creation. That means we can enjoy it, worship through it, and glorify God by sports, art, and striving for physical health.
- This truth about an incarnated God also helps us understand even something like Mother's Day (No, I didn't forget it was Mothers Day).
  - The incarnation shows us that Jesus Christ was born and was absolutely dependent upon his mother. If he was a real baby, he really would have survived without Mary's uncalculated giving to him.
  - The entirety of God's plan for humanity relied upon a young mother's obedience to God's call on her life: to face the shame of being pregnant before being married and pouring out her life to care for and love a baby.
  - We are born and are entirely dependent upon our mother or someone taking on that role. And these women literally give themselves (their bodies, sleep, mental health) to their children without keeping score, without reprisal.
  - So, make sure you tell your mother today, "thank you for your uncalculated giving to my embodied dependence"
- The fact that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh elevates humanity, elevates motherhood, and our daily lives – he cares about all things.
  - The gospel gives us worth, we're the objects of Christ love.
  - The gospel gives us a deeper identity no matter whether you're a parent or have struggled with infertility.
  -
- It also reiterates his lordship over all aspects of life, not just spiritual parts:
  - "Christ's lordship must extend beyond morality, it must seep into our bones and affect the way we live and move in the world as a work of divine creation. And for that, we need habitual movement toward God." – Constantly testing and seeking him with the Spirit.
- This is why we are all tasked with testing all the spirits in our lives: all our forms of entertainment, education, messages from authorities, advice from friends, positions on social issues.
- This seems impossible but we have the Spirit of truth who uses the Bible and the church to draw us closer to Jesus Christ, our savior, who came in the flesh, suffer for us and now invites us into his family.
  - Where we see reality as it really is, but we also see the beauty of his work in us, in our community, and in the world.