

Truth And Error

1 John 4:1-6

Pastor John Miller

I want you to follow with me as I begin reading in verse 1. John says, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God because many false prophets are gone out into the world." Now this is how we know, my King James has, "Hereby we know," or this is how we know, "the Spirit of God, every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God." Let me repeat that. "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God." That's the test. "And every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, where if you have heard that it should come, even now is already in the world."

John says, verse 4, "You are of God, little children, and you have overcome them because greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world. They are of the world, therefore speak they of the world and the world hears them. We are of God, he that knoweth God heareth us. He that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." One of the distinguishing marks of maturity is the ability to distinguish, to be able to tell the difference. I think of a story of my daughter number three, we have three girls. And my third daughter, her name is Amy, when she was two years old, she was in the living room looking out the window.

It had a low window sill, looked out over the front yard, and my wife was busy working in the kitchen, and she heard little Amy say, "Cat, cat." She thought, "Wow, I wonder what that is." And then she said, "Dog, dog." And then little Amy said, "Rat, rat." Oh, my wife's freaking out by then. She said, "I better go in and check this out." And lo and behold, my wife looks out the window and there's a possum, a possum. So she didn't have it right at all. Wasn't a cat, wasn't a dog, wasn't a rat, it was a possum. Well, if you were to ask Amy the difference today between those animals, she could distinguish them. She's quite grown.

But one of the distinctions of maturity is the ability to be able to tell the difference. You ever notice how toddlers too will put anything in their mouth? "Don't put that in your mouth. Don't put that in your mouth." You're freaking out. And I found Amy in the backyard one time eating dog food. Could have been worse. You laugh because you've been there, right, "Don't touch that." Freak out. Kid is traumatized until today and they're 37 years old. But immaturity is that you just eat anything, you don't know the difference. The same is true in the spiritual realm. I see so many immature gullible Christians who do not know how to distinguish between truth and error.

They don't know what is of God and what is of the devil. They don't know what is of the Holy Spirit and what is of the spirit of antichrist. So in this epistle, John wants us to be able to distinguish and tell the difference. So he gives us three birthmarks of the child of God. The true Christian has three things. Number one, they live righteously. Number two, they love sacrificially. And number three, they believe biblically. So they live righteously, they love sacrificially, and today, our topic is they believe biblically. We come to, again, the mark of the true believer is

sound doctrine or belief that is correct in the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

John turns from the test of love and its importance to the doctrinal test of belief. The life that is real is a life that believes the truth about Jesus. Now let me make this point. A true Christian has love, but love is to be distinguishing mature love. We don't want to sloppy agape. We want to make distinction. We want to love what God loves. And yes, this freaks some people out, but we want to actually hate what God's hate with a holy, righteous indignation. So we have to be distinguished in our love. We don't want to love things that are ungodly or unholy or unrighteous. And when it comes to what we believe, it's very important that we believe correctly about Jesus Christ.

We're going to see today, again in this verse, that is the most important thing that you can have right, who is Jesus and what did he come to do? If you're wrong about Jesus, you're wrong about God. And if you're wrong about Jesus, you don't have God. And John makes that very clear in this passage. So in this passage, he's going to talk about the mark of the believer being sound doctrine or correct belief when it comes to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Now, at the end of chapter three, verse 24, John mentions the spirit which he hath given unto us. And then immediately as he goes into chapter four, verse one, he mentions the fact that you should not believe every spirit but try the spirits whether they are of God.

And then at the end of our passage, verse six of chapter four, he mentions the spirit of truth and the spirit of heir. There is a spirit of truth and there is a spirit of heir. Christians are not to be spiritually doctrinally gullible. They're not to be gullible. They need to know what you believe and they need to know why, and they need to distinguish between truth and heir. We're not to believe every spirit. We are to test the spirits to see whether they are of God because many false prophets are gone out into the world. So what does he do? First thing he does, this is number one, he gives us a commandment. Verse one is in the Greek what's known as an imperative.

That means it's not an option, it's not optional, it's a command. So God is commanding us in his word to make distinction, to be careful, to be discerning. Look at it again with me. Verse one, "Beloved believe not every spirit but try or test the spirits whether they are of God because many false prophets are gone out into the world." Since Satan tempted Eve, he has sought to distort and deny God's word. He is still today the ultimate source behind all false teaching and false doctrine. So we need to be careful. The first recorded words in the Bible out of the mouth of Satan, you know what they were? "Did God really say that?"

And he hasn't stopped yet. Is that really the word of God? Can we really trust the Bible? Is the Bible really true? If he can undermine your faith in the Bible, the Bible is a revelation of God. Without the Bible, we have no light, we have no direction, we have nothing. We're like a ship without a rudder, without a sail. We're like a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat. Ain't going to happen. We need the Bible to illuminate us and direct us and guide us. It's our light, it's our compass, it's our roadmap. You need to know where you're going in life. You need to know truth, you need to know error, and you need to be able to distinguish between the two.

In 2nd Corinthians 11, Satan comes as an angel of light, Paul says. In 1st Timothy chapter four, verse one, "Now the spirit speaks expressly that in the latter times, some shall give heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons." This is a sign of the last days. In 2nd Timothy 4, Paul says, "Preach the word be instant in season, out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering," and catch this, "doctrine." Teaching. Why? Because the time will come when men will not endure sound doctrine. But after their own lust or desires or inklings, they will heap to themselves teachers having itching ears and they will turn away their ears from the truth and should be given unto fables.

This is what we see happening in the church today. People looking for preachers who will tell them what they want to hear and they reject the truth of God's word. Now, I want you to notice that Paul, as I said, gives a command and it's twofold. First of all, believe not every spirit. Now, it's in the present imperative which indicates that the believers there John is writing to were beginning to believe false teachers. So he's actually saying, "Stop believing every spirit. Don't be gullible. Don't be naive. Don't be immature. Make a distinction. There's the true teaching of God. There's the false teaching. Wherever God has a true doctrine, Satan has a counterfeit."

Satan has a counterfeit for every reality that God has. So stop believing. And I would say this, don't believe every preacher just because a preacher's in a church and just because he's on a pulpit and just because he's standing on the platform and just because he has a Bible, doesn't mean you believe them. You bring your Bible, you open your Bible, you listen, but you listen critically. Is what the preacher's saying what the Bible actually says and means? A lot of preachers will read from the Bible, but they don't explain the Bible in its historical-grammatical theological context. My goal in preaching is to say nothing more than what the Bible says. That's my goal.

I'm not here to tickle your ears. I'm not here to impress you. I'm not here to give you some new insight that's never been seen before. I'm not preaching anything the apostles didn't preach and all the Christians have preached for 2000 years. I like what Harry Ironside once said, he said, "If it's new, it's not true. If it's true, it's not new." So if you go, "Man, I've never heard this before," that's maybe because it's not true. Wow, that's deep. He's unlocking hidden meanings that only he has the key to. Beware of preachers who have just one key, that say, "I have the key and you have to come to me to get this knowledge. And for 39.95, you can buy my new book."

If it's new, it's not true. If it's true, it's not new. And God has given to you his Holy Spirit. God has given you his word, which is inspired by the spirit of truth. Amen. So the spirit of truth will never lead us into error. So don't believe in it. I mentioned this first service and I want to make it clear second service, my only authority is if I say what the Bible says. The Bible is the authority, not me. The Bible is the authority, not our church, not our denomination, not our elder board, not anything, a priest, prophet, pastor, Pope. Yes, I said Pope. And with all due respect, I can't believe I'm even going to say this, but I'm going to say this, I can't believe the things that he talks about.

We have moral issues and Bible issues and truth issues, and the whole world is listening to him

and I'm thinking, "Share the gospel. Preach the gospel of Jesus Christ." No human being, no institution, no denomination, no organization is the authority. The Bible alone. This is what the Protestant reformers introduced. This is the reason for Protestantism. They rebelled against the Roman Catholic Church and said, "The authority is not the church. The authority is the Bible." And that is the fundamental difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The Bible and Bible alone is the authority. I'm not the authority. A preacher isn't the authority.

Your experience isn't the authority. Your intellect isn't the authority. Your college professor is not the authority. The Bible and the Bible alone is the authority. So don't believe every spirit, but try the spirits. The word try is test. It was used for testing metals to determine its genuineness. So he's warning them in love. And believe me, it's a loving thing to warn naive people. If you have a little toddler and they're going to put something in their mouth that can be harmful, it's like, "Ah, don't touch that." They start crying. They think you're mean. They think you don't love them. "If you really love me, you'll let me eat this stuff I found in the grass."

No, it's because I do love you. I'm not just going to get a video, "Look at what they're doing," on video and show them when they're getting married, "This is what you ate in the grass." That's mean. So John is warning us, "Don't believe, test or try. Put them to the test." And as I've already alluded to, the test is given by the Bible. What is the plumb line? It is the scriptures. How do we know it's God's word? How do we know it's true? We use God's word. We use the scripture as the final court of appeal, the final rule of authority. Now, why do we need to test the spirits? Notice verse one, to determine their origin, whether they are of God.

That word of God speaks of the source or the origin. It doesn't come from God. You need to determine whether it comes from God. Why is this needed? Because verse one, many false prophets are gone out into the world. So there's the warning, there's the command. Now, the second thing he does in verses two and three is he gives us an explanation how to test the spirits. And here it is, verse two and three, "Hereby know we the spirit of God, every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God." And then the negative, "Every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God." Now, that's pretty clear, right? Who is of God? Who is not of God? But this is the spirit of antichrist, verse three, you heard that it would come and even now is already in the world.

So John says, this is how we recognize the spirit of God versus the spirit of error. The test by which it is true or false is the confession or doctrine or belief concerning Jesus Christ. Notice verse two, "That Christ is come in the flesh." Now, literally this would be a translated confession that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh. And when he says that, it means more than just believing in the historicity of the man, Jesus. I believe that. I believe there was a Jesus. I believe he was a historical figure. That's not what he's talking about. He's talking about all the Bible teaches, all that is involved in the doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Remember John was combating in the early stages, a heresy known as Gnosticism, the word ginosko, gnostic or know. It comes from the idea that they knew, they had deeper knowledge, and that they would introduce you to this deeper knowledge. It had two branches, two branches

of Gnosticism. One was called docetism and the other was called Cerinthianism. They were following two false teachers. Now, the docetists taught that Jesus only seem to have a body. They didn't believe in the physical humanity, the actual body of Jesus. They believe when he walked on the beach, he left no footprints, that he was just a spirit, that he was just a ghost, kind of like Casper the Friendly Ghost.

If you reach out and touch him, your hand would go right through him. So they denied the humanity of Jesus. Then there were those who were following Cerinthus. They said Jesus is a man, but only a man. That he's a human being only. That the Christ came upon the man, Jesus. When he was baptized, the Christ came upon the man, Jesus. When he died on the cross and he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" They taught that the Christ left the man, Jesus. So he is born just a human, he died just a human. He lived for three years with the Christ, the anointing upon him. Now, this is real popular today, the idea that the anointing and that the Christ spirit can come on different individuals or that all of us have the Christ spirit, that we're all anointed, that we're all divine.

We just need to look within and find that spark of divinity within us. It's quite popular and the world's listening to this. Jesus Christ is unique and he is the eternal God who became man through the womb of the Virgin Mary, took on humanity, and maintained his full deity. I could say it a lot of different ways, but let me explain it like this. Jesus Christ always has been God. Jesus Christ always will be God. Even when he was born in Bethlehem, he was divine and his divinity never took away from his full humanity. Jesus Christ is equally, when he was born in Bethlehem and took on a body, equally human, fully human. But the only difference between his humanity and our humanity and everybody else's humanity is his humanity was sinless. You got that.

Write that on the inside of your eyelids. Jesus was sinless. He's the only person ever born of a virgin, and he was born of a virgin. And that which was conceived in the womb of Mary was the work of the Holy Spirit. And it only makes sense that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth would testify to his incarnation and testify through the apostolic writings which are given by inspiration of God, the spirit of truth, that he was God manifested in the flesh. And when John says, "You confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh," what you're saying there is that he is the Messiah and that he is come, which implies his preexistence, and that Jesus Christ is the eternal son of God and is come in the flesh, speaks of his real incarnation, his full humanity.

And by the way, that's what's called the perfect tense, which means it happened in time and it will go on for eternity. So this is the way you can phrase it. I know this is a little mind-stretching but track with me. In the womb of the Virgin Mary, humanity and deity were fused together for all eternity. In the womb of the Virgin Mary, deity and humanity were fused together for all eternity. That means when we get to heaven, who are we going to see in heaven? The glorified exalted God-man, Jesus Christ. And he's still going to have scars in his hands, scars on his feet, and scars in his side. He's going to have a new body, a glorified body. By the way, it's a prototype of our body.

When you die in Christ and you're resurrected, you get one just like Jesus. You're not going to

be God, but you're going to be a glorified human being. You're going to have a new body suited for heaven. So he is the God-man in heaven. And when he comes back, it'll be the same Jesus that was crucified, buried, and physically, bodily rose from the dead who comes back and for a thousand years reigns upon earth. In light of what's going on in our nation today and the coming election and all the moral decay, I long for that day. I pray even so, "Come, Lord Jesus, I pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

So when John says you confess, verse two, that Jesus is the Messiah, you're confessing all the Bible teaches about the divine incarnate, eternal son of God. Now, in verse three, in typical fashion, John states the opposite. If you deny this, then you are not of God. You are antichrist. So John makes it very clear, there's a distinction there. Now, the Jehovah's Witnesses deny the deity of Jesus Christ. They teach that he was Michael the Archangel and that he came down to earth. The Mormons, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, deny that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Godhead, the eternal God, and that he's God manifested in the flesh. Islam teaches that Jesus Christ was just a man, but he was a prophet of God, but not as important as Muhammad. The Bible says Christ is to have preeminence.

In Hinduism, Jesus is not God, but only one of many incarnations. This is popular in the West today. In Buddhism, Christ was only a good teacher, but less important than Buddha. Now, I don't usually recommend books when I'm in the middle of a sermon, but I'm going to recommend a book and the bookstore is going to freak out because they probably don't have enough in stock for everybody, but write down the book, *So What's the Difference?* It's written by a guy by the name of Fritz Ridenour. *So What's the Difference?* And what it does is it takes all the different religions and it parallels them and lines them up with orthodox Christianity.

And you see the distinctions, you see the differences very clearly laid out for you in that book so well put together. So this is the antichrist who is going to come in the last days. And an indication that we're living in the last days is that we see a rise in spiritual deception. We see a rise in spiritual deception and in our own country, the United States of America, we have been drifting for a long time. Started very clearly in the 1920s. Liberalism came into the church. They denied the Bible to be infallible, inerrant word of God. Professing to be Christians, they denied the virgin birth. They denied his bodily resurrection. They denied the miraculous.

The trend has continued and escalated to the point where it's spilled into our country, our society. We have relativism and pluralism. And in modern culture, there's no distinction between truth and error. In our modern culture, they don't even believe there's such a thing as truth. It's all relative. Your truth is your truth, my truth is my truth, and we have to be tolerant. And you can't tell me I'm wrong, I can't tell you that you're wrong. We all just have to love each other and get along and just all join hands and sing kumbaya together. Are we to be unloving? No. That's a mark of a Christian. Are we to be kind? Yes.

Are we to show tolerance to people? Yes, but tolerance is not agreeing that what you believe is true. Tolerance is respecting that you can believe what you want to believe and you can hold that view. But it's respectfully saying, "I believe that is not true, that is wrong." The idea that you

can be sincere and get to heaven is nowhere taught in the Bible. People can be sincerely deceived. You can hear something going on in your house at night and grab a gun and shoot and think that you're killing a burglar or an intruder, and you can be absolutely sincere and you've just shot your wife or your husband or your kids or a family member and you didn't realize what you did was a big mistake.

So you can be sincere, and I believe that many of the cultists that knock on your door and they come trying to promulgate their doctrine, that many of them are sincere, but they're sincerely deceived and it's up to us to try to share the truth with them. In the new house we moved to here in Marietta, we've only been there a couple of years, so twice I've had Jehovah's Witnesses knock on my door. Now I'm a marked man, I have a marked house, and they won't come back. So get as much in the first few times because they won't come. I was on my front porch the other day and I saw them coming down the street. I thought, "Okay, here we go again.

Here they come." They wouldn't even look at me. They just walked right by. I felt like saying, "Hey, I'm a sinner. I need help. Come help me." They're going like, "That's Pastor Miller's church from Revival Christian Fellowship. We ain't going over there." I was nice. I smiled. I tried to be as polite as I could, but I tried to show them that their doctrine is the spirit of antichrist. And we need to do the same. So often we just shut the door and pull the drapes and make like we're not home. Know what you believe and be able to share the truth of the gospel in love. There are such a thing as false prophets.

John RW Stott says this, "No system can be tolerated, however loud its claims are learned its adherence if it denies Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh." That is if it denies either his eternal deity or his historical humanity. It teaches his teachers are false and their prophets are false, and his origin is the spirit of antichrist. Those who deny the Son have neither the Father nor the Spirit. You can't be wrong about Jesus and right about God. So what does John do in conclusion? He gives us an assurance, verses four to six. Gives us a command, tells us how to put them to the test, the Christ test. Do you believe that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, died on the cross for our sins, rose bodily again from the dead? And then he gives them this assurance, and he outlines three groups in closing here. And verses four, five, and six, all open with an emphatic personal pronoun.

Let me point them out and then I'll go back and read them again. Verse four, you are of God. Verse five, they are of the world. Verse six, we are of God. Three groups. You verse four, they verse five, we verse six. Now, the assurance of the true believer is in verse four, "You are of God, little children." The you there in verse four is the Christian. The one who has the life that is real. You're of God, you've overcome them. That is the false teachers because greater is he in you than he that is in the what?

World.

Greater is he in you than he that's in the world. Now, that's a verse you ought to give thanks to God for. Amen. God is in you. You have the spirit of truth. He that is in the world is a reference to

the false teacher, the false spirit, and behind it, Satan, the spirit of antichrist. You are of God, little children. Now, how have we overcome them? Not physically, not morally. There's some cultists that live better than true born-again Christians do? They're more devoted, they're more holy, they're more pious. There's heathens, there's non-Christians that live moral lives better than Christians do. Shame on us.

But the area we've overcome them is in the area of truth. It's an intellectual overcoming. We know the truth. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth and he's given it to us in the teachings of the Bible, you've overcome them. Greater is he in you than he that is in the world. Then notice secondly, verse five, the worldly character of the false prophets. It says, "They," the false teachers, "are of the world, therefore speak they of the world and the world hears them." What are the marks of a false prophet? They're saying what the world says. They're speaking philosophies of the world, the things of the world, the ideas of the world, and the world applauds them. The world listens to them.

They have the popular TV shows and they promote their spirituality. What's in today? You know what's in vogue? You can be spiritual without being doctrinal or theological. You can be spiritual and you can be spiritual without being moral even, for that matter. And that's what the Gnostics taught too, by the way, they despise the material and they said, "God isn't concerned with your body. You can do whatever you want morally with your body, even sin as long as your spirit is focused on God. You can live however you want." That's false teaching. Christianity never draws the dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. The more spiritual you are, the more holy you live. And your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, so you're to live a holy life. But these are false prophets. They speak the things of the world, the world hears them, the world listens to them, and buys their books in groves.

You think Oprah's going to hold up a book by John MacArthur or an evangelical scholar, Timothy Keller, and say, "This is a great book. You ought to read it"? No, because in that book is truth. And a matter of fact, in that book, it'll say, "Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." So that book is going to be thrown in the trash by the world. But it's true. It's biblical. And you know what you believe determines how you behave. I'm old enough and have been around long enough that I remember the James Jones cult and Guyana. I remember the pictures on the front of Time Magazine of the bloated bodies. They drank the Kool-Aid, and they're all dead. What you believe is important. It can lead to death. It can lead to eternal death.

Or David Koresh, the professed Messiah, and the silly followers that followed him, and they're in this cult in Waco, Texas. They're all dead because they followed false doctrine. Sound doctrine is healthy or life-giving, bad doctrine leads to bad living. It can even lead to death. And I've seen so many tragic consequences of incorrect belief. So, verse four, "You have overcome because greater is he the spirit of truth who's in you than he that is in the world." We have God's spirit, we have God's word. But they are of the world, they speak the things of the world, and the world hears them. That's why be careful when you're listening to a supposed Bible preacher, but what he's saying is the same thing the world is saying. Woe unto you when all men speak well

of you, for so speak they well of the false prophets.

And then notice in conclusion verse six, "We are of God." This is a reference to the apostles. So verse four, the Christians, and then verse six, we apostles, "He that knows God heareth us. He that knoweth not God knoweth not us." By the way, notice that is the spirit of heir and that is the spirit of truth. So we have the apostles, the true apostles, they are speaking the things of God, and the world is not hearing them. The world's not listening to him. But in verse six, "He that hears us, he is of God. He that hears not us is not of God." Now, in simple statement here, and I want to conclude with this, basically, what John is saying, that in the Bible, we have the apostolic authority, we have apostolic truth, and we can believe what God said, take it to the bank.

Is it in the word of God? Is it historically, theologically, grammatically, properly interpreted? Not everyone that says, "Lord, Lord," not everyone that preaches from the Bible is preaching truth. So get yourself a real Bible. Get a Bible. And when I say, "Real Bible," I get myself in trouble here because people will show up with their little electronic devices. Actually, they have it on their phone. And I'm preaching, they're on their phone, I don't know if you're texting or following me. You're probably playing some game on your iPhone. Get a real Bible, one that you can smell.

I love smelling my Bible. And if anyone wants to smell my Bible after church, you can take it. I'm going to give you a sniff. You can turn the pages, you can see it in context. Make it your Bible and bring your Bible to church. I want you to come with your Bibles. We're studying the Bible because we want to be able to distinguish the spirit of truth from the spirit of error. Amen. But maybe you're here today and you say, "Pastor John, I don't know if I'm a true Christian. I don't know if I've ever really trusted Jesus Christ. I don't know if I've really invited him." This is the test, the content of what is being taught, and the character of the one who is listening.

You can tell a lot of times that you have a false prophet by the character of the people who are following him. The congregation is a reflection of the pastor. If a pastor's preaching the true word of God, the people have an appetite for it. They have a hunger for it. If you aren't born again, "I don't like that. I can't believe what Pastor Miller said today, we're finding another church." If I'm preaching what God says in his word, you have a decision to make. Is it true? Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." "No one gets to heaven except through me," that's what Jesus said.

It's either true or it's false. You must decide. And if you haven't trusted Jesus today, if you haven't surrendered your heart and life to him, the Bible says, "All of us have sinned. All of us have fallen short of the glory of God." The Bible says, "There's no one righteous, no not one." But Jesus Christ came from heaven, born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, and willingly, voluntarily laid down his life upon a cross for you to be forgiven. But until you put your faith in him, that's the mark of a true believer, you trust Jesus, you believe in Jesus, you're not really a child of God. Jesus said, "You must be born again." I want to give you an opportunity this morning, if you don't know you're Christian, if you don't know your sins are forgiven, if you don't know

you're saved, if you don't know that if you were to die today, you'd go to heaven, I want to give you an opportunity to invite Jesus Christ to come into your heart and to forgive your sins.