



Lesson 7 – Testing the Spirits

1 John 4:1-6

“Who’s telling the truth?” Many a parent has stood over the mess that their children made and asked that question after hearing directly contradictory stories. John is a writing to a church that is in a similar but much more serious situation. It’s not children who are telling them different things; it’s teachers. One teacher tells them that Jesus is the Christ, come from God in the flesh and that His sacrifice removes their sins and opens the way to fellowship with God. Other teachers are coming along and denied crucial aspects of that teaching. They claimed to do so by a revelation from the Spirit. All of this was confusing for John’s church. They weren’t sure how to reconcile these different teachings and who to trust.

John has touched on the problem of false teachers before, but he spends a little extra time here showing the believers he ministered to how to know who to listen to. Although we might not be facing the exact same threats today, we too face wrong teaching and the principles behind John’s instructions will help the church today as they did for the church during John’s time.

Read through the passage and ask your group what general principles can be found for evaluating and recognizing false teachers.

What happens when Christians believe what false teachers are trying to get them to believe?

I. The test of doctrinal orthodoxy (4:1-3)

The first test that is given to the church is the test of doctrinal orthodoxy. Before the New Testament was completely written, the role of the Holy Spirit worked differently. Some believers had the gift of prophecy and would receive special revelation that they would then communicate with their churches. The problem arose, however, when some claimed the Spirit had revealed things that clearly contradicted what they had been told before.

Churches can and do disagree on many things. What do we mean by “doctrinal orthodoxy”? What types of wrong teaching should count as a departure from orthodoxy?

A. The reality of false teachers (4:1, 3b)

People tend to give others the benefit of the doubt, especially if those people are friends or are generally nice people. We don't like to think of nice people as dangerous. Too often we forget that Scriptures warns us Satan himself can be transformed into an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). Sometimes evil wears a pleasant smile and practices good manners.

To combat this, John warns his readers clearly that false teachers do exist, that there is a different spirit behind them than the Holy Spirit, and that they need to be avoided at all costs. We as modern-day believers need to have an appropriately critical eye to realize that not everything that sounds good is good. Some ideas are dangerous and destructive, regardless of the friendliness and attractiveness of the person sharing them.

How can we be appropriately careful and critical without becoming cynical?

B. The necessity of right doctrine (4:2-3a)

The right doctrine here concerns the person of Jesus. Getting Jesus right is crucially important. From the earliest days of the church, the question of who Jesus is has been a big point of debate. It took several hundred years to fully nail down the definition that has become widely accepted: one person with two natures. 100% God and 100% man. But there are some who still get this point wrong.

What modern day beliefs deny the divinity of Jesus?

What other teachings do we need to aware of?

The specific issue that John was facing was the problem of who Jesus was, and while that continues to be a major dividing point, it's not the only one. Other major doctrinal issues that Christians need to be carefully instructed on include the nature of the trinity, salvation by faith apart from works, and the authority of God's Word.

II. The confidence for testing the spirits (4:4)

The attitude we have when we think about false teachers matters. While we need to take them and their teaching seriously, we also need to keep a confident perspective. We should not curl up in the corner shivering for fear of false teachers. Our caution is not a caution of fear but a caution of love for God and others. John warns his readers about the danger of false teachers, but he pauses in this verse to give some encouragement.

A. The confidence of a relationship with God (4:4a)

We need to be carefully instructed in God's Word, but we don't want to think that our persevering in the right doctrine is the result of us simply being smart enough. John reminds his readers that their ultimate confidence comes from the fact that they have

been “born of God” (cf 1 John 2:29) and that they are therefore “from God.” This relationship with God is what gives us our ultimate confidence that false teachers will not be successful in their attempts to pull us away from the truth. When we are saved, the Holy Spirit comes to live within us, and He is the one who keeps us back from the edge of false teaching (cf 1 John 3:24).

Why is it that a relationship with God will preserve us from false teaching?

B. The confidence in God’s power (4:4b)

God’s greatness is enough to keep us from adopting false teaching. God is more powerful than Satan, the one who is in the world and the one who inspires and motivates the world. When we think about the seriousness of the spiritual battles that we are called on to fight, and the subtle deception of the enemy, it is tempting to feel overwhelmed. But John wants his readers to feel, not overwhelmed, but confident. He wants them to have a confidence, not in their own ability to avoid adopting false teaching, but in their God’s ability to keep and preserve them.

How should this perspective – that our confidence comes from our relationship with God and from God’s great power – how should this perspective affect us?

What does this mean for our own work in the matter? What responsibility do we still have in relation to avoiding false teaching?

III. The test of fellowship (4:5-6)

Who listens to us and whom we listen to matter. We should be extremely cautious about those who give a message that resonates with the world and who have the ear and the approval of the world. The message of Jesus Christ is a message that cuts against the grain of the world. John is here saying that you should pay careful attention to the person you are listening, because who else listens to the same person reveals a lot about which team they are on.

What are some ways that the gospel contradicts the thinking of the world in 21st century Americans?

What are some ways that false teachers can preach a gospel (that isn’t the gospel) in a way that appeals to the world around us?

A. Beware listening to the wrong sources (4:5)

One of the ways the New Testament instructs believers to beware of false teachers is by looking at their conduct and character. Other New Testament letters frequently associate false teaching with sinful, worldly lifestyles and attitudes (cf Jude 4-8; 2 Peter 1-3, 10, 14;

2 Timothy 3:1-8). John here warns these believers to consider the source when listening to teaching. The life of the person teaching matters and should line up with the teaching they bring forward. Those who sound like the world, live like the world, and have the approval of the world should not be the types of people we Christians listen to.

How did we define worldliness in our previous lesson?

What would it look like for a teacher to line up with the thinking and living of the world, and then try to teach Christians to do the same?

We want to be careful here once again as we seek to limit our use of the word “false teachers.” This word should not be used of someone who holds to biblical orthodoxy but might have looser standards than us. At the same time, we need to beware of teachers and teaching that “turn [pervert] the grace of God into lasciviousness [sensuality].” Those who present a gospel that looks like and sounds like the world are dangerous. Don’t just pay attention to what is being said, pay attention to who is saying it.

B. Be sure to listen to the right sources (4:6)

Living rightly means more than ignoring the wrong voices, it also means listening to God’s voice. Being born again means that we have the Holy Spirit who leads and guides us into the truth of God’s Word. But John’s point goes beyond this to argue that those who are listen to God form a group, and those who are not listen to Him form a different group.

Why does it matter so much that we surround ourselves with those who listen to God and follow His Word? What happens if we don’t?

We began by asking the question “Who’s telling the truth?” This lesson as given us two tests to help us answer the question. First, we can trust teachers who teach what lines up with God’s Word: our record of the witness of apostles like John who were commissioned by Christ to give His truth. Secondly, we should pay attention to how teachers live and conduct themselves. Those who live lives of disobedience to God and whose lives and values line up with the thinking and living of the world should not be listened to. In all of this, God’s wants us to have the confidence that by the power of the Spirit He dwells in us, and greater is He that is in us than He that is in the world.

What would you say to a believer who you were worried about because you feared they were listening to the wrong kind of teaching?

How can you yourself take care to make sure that you avoid false teaching?