

JUST TO BE SURE**1 John 4:1-6****(Read 1 John 4:1-6)**

Intro: A couple weeks ago you graciously allowed me to take a few days of vacation. It was a staycation, where I stayed at home and Evan and I refurbished the deck on our house. My hope is that Kathy and I will be able to enjoy the deck for another decade (no pun intended) before we have to replace it. We accomplished this by pulling every nail and screw and turning the deck planks over. I had to replace about twenty boards and when we finished at the end of the week, it almost looked like we knew what we were doing.

You see, I'm not the most confident carpenter. Put a paint brush in my hand and I'll out paint almost anyone, but put a saw in my hand and you better run for safety. As we worked. I often remembered an adage that carpenters who know soooo much more than me would often quote as they helped me with carpentry. It was "Measure once, and cut twice or Measure twice and cut once." The wisdom of that is, of course, to not get going too fast and slow yourself down and waste your time and hard earned money as a result. I forgot it one time, and to be fair it was when I was cutting my first angled board – which actually requires parts of my brain that probably didn't come in my model. The result was, I cut the angle exactly reverse of what I needed, resulting in the loss of about 20 inches of plank. After that, I took my time, and measured twice, just to be sure.

Living as a Christ Follower requires similar carefulness – and it's nothing new. While we have what people have dubbed fake news these days, it's been true that ever since the Apostle John's time the rumor mills and false messages have run rampant through society. John warns his readers, and that includes us, to be careful in our Christian walk—he says to test the spirits, just to be sure.

I was interested as I researched this passage, that commentators have surprisingly little to say about it. Perhaps they think that spirits are less prevalent today than they were when John wrote these words to a church that was dealing with false prophets and their convincing messages. As he commented on John's opening words in verse one about not believing every spirit, William Barclay wrote, "*Behind this warning is a situation of which we in the modern church know little or nothing. In the early church there was a surging life of the Spirit which brought its own perils. There were so many and such diverse spiritual manifestations that some kind of test was necessary.*" (end quote) It was as if he believed that rampant false prophets and Satan's demons were a problem then but not so much today. If that is the reason there wasn't much commentary on the passage – then these Bible teachers have succumbed to the very warning John is giving. The same devil John battled in his day is plying his deception today and there is just as much reason, or perhaps more, to tread carefully as we walk through the minefield of living these days. We need to be sure. So let's look at it. John begins, as we have seen, with . . .

Don't believe everything you hear or everything you read!

- We are not obligated to believe everything that comes down the pike. It's almost hilarious to hear some of the things people take as fact just because they read it on the internet. It's amazing how quickly a false witness spreads once it gets on Facebook. It seems that every day of the year is fire season as rumors and half-truths spread like a fire in a dry pine forest in a society with a 24 hour news cycle and instant access to the worldwide web. A rumor can ruin the good reputation of a fine person in mere minutes with how fast titillating, but false, information can spread. We do well to stop, think, and research before we believe or even pass on information that sounds false, or, even true. Our integrity as Christ Followers demands it.
- For the people John was writing to, times were exciting. The church was still less than 100 years old. The Good News was just that, GOOD NEWS, as people were hearing about the transforming power of Jesus Christ. The problem is, in their exuberance, people were tending to believe anything and everything they heard. False prophets were saying they had direct word from God, and others were impersonating the apostles.
- There was also the problem of simply getting carried away in the beauty of the Holy Spirit. The early church was full many examples of the work of the Holy Spirit – from the Day of Pentecost, to the witness of Philip's daughters, to Peter's change of heart toward Gentiles, and many more. It was so much so that Paul had to address what it meant to have orderly worship in the entire chapter of 1 Corinthians 14 – because people were gibber-jabbering away in tongues and no one could interpret. It was a bad witness, not because the people were full of the Holy Spirit – that's a good thing – but because any new arrivals to a worship service would run away in fear thinking they had entered a looney bin.

- But sometimes, what people honestly thought was the Holy Spirit was not the Holy Spirit, but counterfeit spirits straight from the pit of Hell. Jesus dealt with demons, and his disciples also did, after He had returned to the Father. John warns his readers that everything was not as it seemed. William Barclay says, *“All this is in John's mind; and it is in face of that surging atmosphere of pulsating spiritual life that he sets out his criteria to judge between the true and the false. We, for our part, may well feel that with all its perils, the exuberant vitality of the early church was a far better thing than the apathetic placidity of so much of the life of the modern church. It was surely better that men should expect the Spirit everywhere than that they should expect him nowhere.”* (end quote) Yes, it is better that we should expect the Spirit everywhere than to expect him nowhere, but ONLY if we know to test the spirits. We need to know what comes from God and what does not. We know that love comes from God. But not every spirit is from God. So John offers some criteria – a test if you will. . .

Here is the test:

- You need to believe that Jesus came, as God, in the flesh. You need to believe that he came as a human being into time and space. Listen to what John says as he lays this out, *This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.* 1 John 4:2-3 Barclay says, *For John, Christian belief could be summed up in one great sentence: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Any spirit which denied the reality of the Incarnation was not of God.*
- To deny Jesus is the Messiah is to deny that he could be a Savior. To deny Jesus is the Messiah is to say there cannot be a connection between God and humanity. Barclay rightly points out, *“Nothing in Christianity is more central than the reality of the manhood of Jesus Christ.”* We have pointed out over and over again in this series that John and Jude were both writing to the church to address and spread the warning that the message of the Gnostics was false prophecy. And as a quick review, let me remind you that the Gnostics taught that they had special knowledge that made them special and elevated. Another tenant of Gnosticism was the very thing John was warning against here in these verses – the Gnostics were teaching that Jesus only came in spirit and that’s why they could sin to their hearts content in their physical bodies, because their spirits were clean and pure as the wind driven snow. John exposes this lie. Jesus came into the world and walked among us as a flesh and blood man. Remember the very first verses of this letter? John points out that he was an eyewitness to this flesh and blood Son of God, *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it.* 1 John 1:1-2a.
- This is why you need to test the spirits, just to be sure. And then, as we saw last week, John assures his readers of what they have in Christ – he encourages them with the good news that . . .

Because we are from God, we know that what we have in him is greater than the evil in the world

- He is saying, we don’t have to be afraid, we just have to be sure. I hear so much weeping and gnashing of teeth about the sorry state of the world and how it’s destroying the church. Let me tell you this – God’s church will not be destroyed. What is happening is that the true church is getting stronger.
- This past week a study came out of Barna Research that showed how America is sliding into Post-Christianity. It had the top 100 markets in the country and where they stood in the slide (Columbus was #43 and Cleveland/Akron was #52). They also showed the top 10 least religious cities. I’m not sure if you can see, but 8 of the 10 are in New England or the Northeast with Portland/Auburn, Maine as the least religious. The report began this way, *“It may come as no surprise that the influence of Christianity in the United States is waning. Rates of church attendance, religious affiliation, belief in God, prayer and Bible-reading have all been dropping for decades. By consequence, the role of religion in public life has been slowly diminishing, and the church no longer functions with the cultural authority it held in times past. These are unique days for the church in America as it learns what it means to flourish in a new “Post-Christian” era.”*

I love that final sentence and that's why I put it up on the screen. Notice how it is not a call to throw up our hands and surrender, but to flourish instead. That is what the church is called to do. John says in verse 4 that we are from God because we have overcome the antichrists that inhabit this world. We are overcomers – so let's overcome!

- I sent the link to the study to Jay when I got it this week, and his response to it was “*Christians are quickly becoming "not the norm" in American society. However, the ones that remain will be stronger.*” That's it! We will be stronger. And my friend Jeff, who pastors a large church in Kansas, commenting on the link, wrote this about post Christian people “I actually feel like all this "becoming post-Christian" isn't really there being less Christians but just a less Christian-looking culture. It was expected that people act Christian and go to Church, in years past, even if they didn't love Jesus. Now, if someone doesn't love Jesus it's become normal for them not to fake it. I think in some ways it will help the Church be more real.” And I say YES! Christ Followers have to be more real! The world wants authenticity in the face of fake news, scandalous politics, and personal betrayal. We need to be sure and true and definitely not afraid – our God is too great for us to be afraid.
- And then we won't be intimidated by false prophets – we will stand for the truth. We have the smarts to sort the spirits out because we have scripture and the Holy Spirit to enlighten us. So we don't have to fear the false prophets. As I quoted previously in these talks, All that Christians have to do is remember the truth we already know and cling to it. So if something doesn't sound right, trust your instincts, it's probably false. When you are dealing with false messages realize that a false teacher will not listen to or accept the truth. The Bible is clear and they reject it. Conversely, those from God, accept what is from God.

Conclusion: I need to wrap this up. Let me just finish by reminding us to just be sure about the messages we receive and the ones we pass on. Also, don't be surprised when people from the world believe what the world teaches, those from the world, spout what the world teaches – but don't fall for it yourself. Just to be sure. Amen.