



When I was a teen, and even in college, I remember people trying to make jokes about people being gullible. We'd say something like, "Did you know the word 'gullible' isn't in the dictionary?" Or, "Someone wrote the word 'gullible' on the ceiling. Look!" Or, the age-old one where you pointed to something on someone's shirt and then said, "Made you look." If people responded to any of these, we'd laugh and say "Made you look," or, "You're so gullible."

But is that gullibility? Taking people's words seriously isn't a bad thing, is it? When we look at the ceiling or look at our shirt, what we're actually doing in that moment is either believing *or* testing the person's words. Is what they said true? I'll look at the ceiling. Now, don't get me wrong. The idea of saying 'gullible' isn't in the dictionary should raise some red flags for people, but my point remains. We were created to be inquisitive and test the accuracy of people's words.

We do this in all sorts of other situations. If you go to a doctor and get a recommendation that might seem serious, you may want to get a second opinion. Or, when buying a house, unless absolutely convinced it's in perfect shape, you hire a house inspector to test the house. When you buy a car, you may ask to have it checked by a mechanic first. The more significant the issue, the greater you want to test, right?

Since that's the case in many situations in life, you would think we should function this way when people speak on behalf of God. God is the most significant Being to speak about, right? Well, we shouldn't be surprised that we see the example of testing in the Scriptures. The Bereans who were hearing solid preaching were spoken well of for taking what they heard and testing it to see if it actually was faithful to what God taught in his Word. Throughout the Old Testament, the nation of Israel is reminded to differentiate between true and false prophets. How could they do this? They could remember what God spoke in his Word. This same instinct ought to be ours today as well.

This is what John challenges the Christians to in the passage we're looking at today, and this reality is relevant for us as well. We shouldn't be gullible and just believe and embrace anything people say simply because they say they believe Jesus, and then they throw some Bible verses out there. We need to test what's said in accordance with God's Truth. Just because something can make sense to us doesn't mean it passes the test. What might be logical to me might not be biblically logical.

So, how do we grow in this discernment? How do we not be gullible? What essential test do we need to help us? Well, John gives us a litmus test in 1 John 4:1-3, and this test centers on Jesus himself. This actually should make a lot of sense to us. We call ourselves Christ followers; so, we then ought to be following Jesus, right? But maybe you think this test is too simplistic. You could object by saying that

there are plenty of people to say they follow Jesus, but they live and walk in sinful patterns without any real desire to repent. You're right.

Let me explain this litmus test a little further. In 1956, there was a gameshow that debuted called "To Tell the Truth." You'd have multiple people who pretended to be a certain individual. Through participants asking questions, they'd eventually make their guess as to who the authentic person was, and we would hear "Would the real ____ stand up?" Let me use it with regards to Jesus. There are a lot of versions of Jesus that people like to create, but those versions are all fake. They're not really Jesus. John is taking us back to the basics and saying that when we listen to how people talk about God, we need to ask, "Is this really Jesus? Will the real Jesus stand up?" And, if the genuine Jesus isn't there, we shouldn't follow the fake.

Why do I say all of this? Well, in the first century, with the people John was writing to, it seems like there was a group of people who were painting an inaccurate picture of Jesus, yet they were also saying they were Christ-followers. They were emphasizing the spiritual realm. Were they right? No. Throughout this letter, John clearly reveals that they're denying essential realities about Jesus. You see, just because people can talk about Jesus, doesn't mean they're actually talking about the *real* or *genuine* Jesus. What John emphasizes in this letter is that Jesus doesn't morph. There's not a Jesus-version for you and a Jesus version for me. Jesus is Jesus, and he doesn't change who he is. So, if you follow some variation of "Jesus," you need to know that you actually don't follow Jesus – and that's dangerous because life is only found in the authentic Jesus, and God desires that we would know him and find life – not remain in death and lies.

With this in mind, let me give you the main idea of the sermon today: **Test the spirits.** Don't be gullible. Test. But why? **Because the spirit of the antichrist, through people, denies essential realities about Jesus, but the Holy Spirit, through Christians, confesses Jesus.**

Here's the simple, straightforward litmus test. And I hope we remember the centrality of this test. I've heard many Christians in the present and past try to use other tests to discern faithfulness, like, "What is the person's view of the book of Revelation?" Or, "Is the earth young or old?" Or, "What's someone's view of the Sabbath?" All of these are important and very valuable questions, but someone's stance on Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. Out of this question springs the issues of life. And so I love how John keeps the main thing the main thing in order to help churches discern the truth. So, whether John's words were first read in the 1st century or they're being read by us in the 21st century, I hope we're so grateful for the practicality found here to discern truth from error.

So, what I'm going to do from this point is to highlight what the spirit of the antichrist teaches and then what the Holy Spirit teaches. Even as I say these words, I hope you see that if you are trying to discern truth from error in our day, John isn't writing here to give a simple, sterile litmus test so you can say, "Error...CHECK!"..."Truth...Check!" John's verbiage here is clearly stating that we live in a world of spiritual warfare. The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4 that **"...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ..."**¹ People are already dead in their sinfulness, but just in case, Satan also wants to put blinders on them, too so that the light of Jesus can't give them life!

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 4:4.

So, I agree with Martin Luther's hymn *A Mighty Fortress*, which says, "...this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us." There is a battle raging in this world that is unseen. The demonic realm wants to spread all sorts of lies about Jesus, getting people to disbelieve Jesus and/or to believe some variation of Jesus. But they don't want people to know the real Jesus. This leads us to the first point of the sermon:

1. The spirit of the antichrist, through people, denies essential realities about Jesus (vv. 1, 3).

Let's read verses 1 and 3 together again: 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. . . .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.²

Do you notice the special word that begins verse 1? Beloved shows up again. All of what John writes is out of immense love for the people. He's concerned for them and their welfare—in this life as well as their eternal welfare. John isn't just laying down rules for them. He loves them. He speaks with love, and so we should receive these words with the same intention. Our God, who is love, loves us and thus doesn't want us to be deceived. Now, we can break down the points that are made here.

Test the spirits. John starts off by saying "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God. . . ." Don't be gullible. Be biblically discerning in everything. I think of Revelation 2, where the Spirit speaks to the Ephesian church and says, "**I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.**"³

If you were wrong, would you want to know it? Then test. Yet, this statement reveals that we as people tend to like to be blissfully unaware. As long as we're happy and we've made things work for ourselves, we might be willing to take or leave truth. That must not be for those who are followers of Jesus, who calls himself the Truth! Therefore, we should be diligent to weigh what people say in accordance with the truth. This is the pattern we find in Scriptures. Christians aren't gullible. 1 Corinthians 14:29 gives us an example to follow: **Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.**⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:21 does as well: **Do not despise prophecies,²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good.**⁵

You know, probably three years ago, I had a person schedule a meeting with Tracy and me. She sat down to discuss certain things, but one thing she wanted to do was share a vision she had about me. She not only shared this vision, but she then interpreted what she thought it meant. It's something I have never experienced before, but do you know what I said from that point? I didn't go into theological arguments with her to express my doubt about what she was saying. Instead, I think I thanked her and then I said something like, "Now we will see if that's genuine. As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5, test the prophecies. If it comes true, that's wonderful. But even in what you're saying here, I'm led to depend on the Lord and his Word for whatever happens. I'm not sure how she took that. But I give this story because I think many people are very quick to receive people's "words" of positive affirmation and just

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:1, 3.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Re 2:2.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 14:29.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Th 5:20–21.

swallow it up. Whether in South Africa with the prosperity gospel lies that poverty-stricken people are believing or in America with a quick-fix, moralistic Jesus; we need to not be gullible. We need to test because

There are many false prophets in the world. But some could say, “Calm down. It’s not that big of a problem.” But John would argue differently. He says “many false prophets have gone out into the world.” He doesn’t say a few. He says many. And notice here how John reveals a connection between the demonic realm and people. The demonic realm is set on lying about Jesus. They blind people, and then people believe their lies, and human beings speak on their behalf! Listen, Satan doesn’t want the minority of people lying about Jesus. He wants a slew of people giving inaccurate pictures of our Savior. If there were many in John’s day, how many more are in ours. This mirrors the apostle Peter’s words in 2 Peter 2:1, **“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them. . .”**⁶ By the way, this is the age-old problem. All the way back in the Garden, Satan sought to deceive Adam and Eve into believing God was different than what he was. God wasn’t gracious and loving and generous, according to Satan. God was unloving, a miser, and self-protective. False prophets have been around from the beginning. And what do they do?

They deny essential realities about Jesus. Look at verse 3 again: every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist. . .⁷ Look at the word “confess.” Remember this showed up in 1:9? This word for confess carries with it the idea of fully agreeing with the reality of something. So, when we confess our sins, we are fully agreeing with God about our sinfulness. When we confess Jesus, we are fully agreeing about the reality of who he is. In verse 2, John emphasizes more of these essential realities – and we’ll talk about this in a moment – but just notice here that the spiritual realm lies about who Jesus really is.

This causes me to think about something that I personally believe is important for all of us here to remember. When talking with people who have either grown up in church and rejected Jesus or people who have never heard of him, remember they have an inaccurate view of Jesus. I think there are many who simply do not even know who the genuine Jesus is. Because of this, I think before we declare things emphatically to people, I’d recommend you be quick to listen first. More than likely, if you listen to them, you will probably be able to say, “If Jesus were like that, I wouldn’t believe on him either. Can you tell me more? As you hear more, you can then ask, “Do you want to hear what the Bible actually says about him?” This is what the spirit of the antichrist – Satan – does not want. But we are called to shine the Light of Jesus. We are called to not be gullible and to pray that the world wouldn’t be – so that all might know the spirit of the antichrist from the Spirit of God!

In all of what I’m saying here, you might be thinking, “Pastor Timothy, why are you so passionate or concerned? Is it really that big of a problem. We hold to the essential historic beliefs of Christians over the past 2,000 years. Is this really a danger for us?” Yes, beloved. Yes. As John said earlier in the letter, there are many antichrists now and the one is coming. Almost 2,000 years later than John’s writing, and we’re closer to the end. In addition, we can have right doctrine and lose our first love. That’s what happened with Ephesus. They were very discerning, but they lost the love for the One they were seeking to defend. If that happens to us, it’ll be a generation or two before this church falls away.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Pe 2:1.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:3.

In addition, we live in a culture that simply seems to believe that as long as you can make some sort of semi-logical argument from the Bible, then you can call yourself good. I remember watching a YouTube video where a guy argued that Jesus encouraged polyamory. Do you know what that is? Many sensual partners. He used Ephesians 5 as his argument. Jesus' bride is comprised of many people. So we should follow Jesus' example here. And while that may sound extreme, I think these arguments will only gain traction in our society. When I look back at the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, you find that it wasn't only adult men who went out to pursue men sensually, but it was men and boys. What's happening in our culture? It's adults and children who are inundated with the secular messages of gender and sexuality.

But this all boils down to our view of Jesus. What are churches proclaiming? Are they proclaiming the real Jesus or some alternative version? There's a sociological study done every two years called "The State of Theology."⁸ Ligonier Ministries partners with LifeWay every two years to do this survey. The most recent results are from 2020. They have done surveys primarily in the US with Christians and non-Christians, and with people who are "evangelical." **To be considered evangelical, respondents had to strongly agree with the following four statements: The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe, It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior, Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin, and Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.**

These are specific questions, right? And yet, somehow, those who strongly affirmed these answered other questions in ways that would seem to contradict these strong affirmations. If you have a chance this week, go to www.thestateoftheology.com to read all the results. But I'm going to give you some responses specifically from those considered to be evangelical. When I say the percentage of those who agree or disagree, I mean those who either strongly or somewhat agreed or disagreed.

- **Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God: 56% agreed**
- **Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God: 30% agreed**
- **Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature: 46% agreed**
- **Even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation: 56% disagreed**
- **God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam: 42% agreed**

Was Jesus created? No. Is Jesus God? Yes. If we are good by nature, do we need a Savior or can we save ourselves? We can save ourselves! If "small sins" aren't treason, then maybe Jesus didn't need to die for the kind people in this world, right? And if Jesus is the only way to God, then Judaism, Islam and other religions cannot be acceptable. Each of these statements contradict who Jesus is and what he came to do. They're denying essential realities about Jesus. I don't know about you, but this is concerning to me. If these are beliefs of people who claim to be orthodox Christians, following the faith that has been passed down from generations, they're being deceived. The spirit of the antichrist is moving in American churches.

But you may say, "Wait, are these statements really denying essential realities about Jesus?" Well, that moves us to the second point in how we test the spirits:

⁸ chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Ligonier-State-of-Theology-2020-White-Paper.pdf

2. The Holy Spirit, through Christians, confesses Jesus (v. 2).

Read verse 2 with me: By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that **Jesus Christ has come in the flesh** is from God. . . .⁹ Just as the spirits of Satan work through people, so the Holy Spirit works through those who trust Jesus. If you have turned from your sins and trusted in Jesus, God the Spirit is at work in you! We know that the Spirit's work in this world is to magnify Christ, and so if we have the Spirit in us, the Spirit's role is to magnify Jesus through us – in our words and our actions.

Why would we not want to magnify Jesus? We who were born traitors of God. We who lived in our blindness. Yet, Jesus, even when we were in our sinfulness and rejecting him, he came to this world and took the eternal punishment our sins deserved on the cross. Look at the love he's displayed! Now, for anyone who knows their sin and turns to Jesus for forgiveness will find forgiveness and be reconciled with God forever!

Our aim in life should be to love the One who has first loved us! Therefore, we confess Jesus Christ has come in the flesh! Again we have the word "confess." We agree with all the reality behind these words. Notice that John doesn't simply say that we confess that a man named Jesus existed on this earth. He also doesn't say that we confess that there was a human being named Jesus. We confess Jesus Christ has *come* in the flesh. This signifies that Jesus existed before he came in the flesh. Also, John adds the term "Christ" to Jesus, emphasizing Jesus is *the Messiah* prophesied in the Old Testament. The Messiah was the Anointed One of God, who is also God, who came to destroy sin and death and to restore God's Kingdom. The Messiah is both Savior and Master over all. Those who turn to Jesus as Savior also submit themselves completely to him as Lord. Progressively we are transformed and changed as we experience his saving work in our lives.

Notice how many beliefs John addresses by this simple litmus test. He addresses **Jesus' Godhead**. He addresses the need of Jesus to be the **Mediator between God and man because Jesus wasn't simply a spirit who appeared, but he had to be a Man to represent the human race**. He addresses the reality of **Jesus being the substitution for our sins, as Isaiah speaks of the Messiah in Isaiah 53**. He addresses our **sinfulness because the Savior must save us from our sins**. These are essential realities about Jesus, and I imagine there are more here. I would encourage all of us, this week, to simply memorize this verse. And ponder the implications of each word. Then in our reading, studying, listening to sermons, we evaluate. Is Jesus being confessed? Is the real Jesus standing up here or is this person declaring a false Jesus?

Again, there are so many Jesus' people are seeking to portray. In our society, we have Jesus, the divine therapist who just wants to make us feel better about ourselves. We have a Jesus who never confronts and is only a friend when I need him. We have the opposite as well. We have the mean-spirited Jesus who wants to destroy every sinner or the Jesus who is just a warrior. The real Jesus is merciful and gracious, and he is also just and righteous. He is Jesus Christ who came in the flesh.

I personally believe the only way that we as Christians will continue to keep the main thing the main thing is if we do not lose our first love. Remember, all these doctrinal disputes do not matter if we do not love Jesus. That's what the Spirit tells Ephesus in Revelation. So, the first question I want to ask you is, "Have you lost the love you had for Jesus in the beginning?" Secondly, maybe you say, "No, I love him dearly," but you've not been discerning. That's dangerous as well. That's gullible. God intends to grow

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:2.

your discernment so that Jesus can and will be seen clearly. Thirdly, I want to ask, “Will you confess Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” to people around you?

Test the spirits. The spirit of the antichrist, through people, denies essential realities about Jesus, but the Holy Spirit, through Christians, confesses Jesus. There is a spiritual battle that matters for eternity. We are in it. Jesus is the answer. Will we depend on the Spirit and confess our Lord and follow him? Will we show the world who the real Jesus is?