



# Test the spirits

*Who's listening to who?*

1 John 4:4-6

**Walking in the Light**  
A study through the book of First John

When I was a child, I remember times when I'd be at church, playing with my friends, and then I'd think to myself, "Where are my parents?" I might try to look around, but sometimes I'd just try to listen carefully. Could I hear my mom's voice or laugh? If I could, I didn't need to see her. I just knew what her voice and laughter sounded like. We're taught from a young age to listen for our parents voices, right? If my dad yelled my name, I was to listen. And, you know what? Kids can do a good job with this. We can discern between one parent's voice from another. If some other parent says, "It's time to go," kids may look, but only that parent's child is the one who leaves. We know our parents voices. It's ingrained from young ages – and that is one evidence that we're family.

This illustration might help you today as we come to the text this morning. Just so you know, this week's sermon is connected to last week's sermon. John began this section, telling the Christians to test the spirits because this world has many false prophets in it. Many people are portraying lies about God and about Jesus. John doesn't want us Christ-followers to be gullible. He wants us to be firm on the essentials. So, what John does in this part of the letter is give two main ways we can test the spirits. The first was given last week. It was a doctrinal test regarding Jesus. **You can tell if someone is a false teacher if they deny essential realities about Jesus.** So, verse 2 serves all believers through the ages by saying "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh." If you want to know more what this means, listen to last week's sermon. It's a simple phrase to say, but it's full of meaning and glory.

Test the spirits. Are people denying essential doctrines about Jesus? In last week's message, I also shared from a sociological survey called "The State of Theology," where Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay research reveal many problematic beliefs from people who are considered "evangelical." Again, if you want to know more of this, listen to my sermon or simply go to [stateoftheology.com](http://stateoftheology.com). Either way, what I hope we all saw is that if there were many false prophets in John's day, there's abundantly more today (and that should spur us on).

But what should it spur us on to? You could listen to last week's sermon about not being gullible, and then hearing about the problematic beliefs people embrace, and you may begin to fear. John says the spirit of the antichrist is coming and is already here. Meaning, Satan is at work in this world, but someday, the final antichrist will be here. We're closer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than in the 1<sup>st</sup>. All of these thoughts might grip you and terrify you. "Oh no! What are we going to do?" And you know what some people do? Some people insulate themselves from the negative influences. They lock themselves away and try to pretend they're fine while the world is burning. That also means they begin to ignore those who are dying without a Savior. Others may ignore in a different way. They'll say, "It's not that bad" in order to feel happy and at ease. They're blissfully ignorant.

What do you do when you know the spirit of antichrist is in the world and there are many false prophets around us? Do you tend to fear? Just know that fear generally doesn't help. It keeps us from seeing all of

God's design clearly. It keeps us from joy and steals trust in God. So, you could fill your mind with, "Aaaahhhh, the anti-Christ is coming! Churches are being destroyed from the inside-out, America is blatantly embracing sinful lifestyles of all sorts without any anchor to God, there is probably a significant recession coming," and you can go on the merry-go-round that fear will take you on, but I believe what God says in the psalms: **Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.** <sup>1</sup>

God doesn't call us to just be angry at the world and live in fear. Why? It only breeds more and more evil, and we learned from John in chapter 3 that Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil. So, John doesn't tell us these things to make us afraid. He tells us to spur us on to righteous action. We should be amazed with Christ's love for us and then grow in discerning how people speak of Jesus, and then John gives us the second point, which is the main idea of the sermon today, for testing the spirits: **examine who people listen to.**

As John speaks in these verses, he doesn't have fear whatsoever. Instead, he breeds confidence in the Spirit of God. We, who may look like we're losing, are not. God is at work in and through us, and we know God's work on this earth will be accomplished; so, we can have confidence – not fear. We can love our enemies, not hate them. We can have a right view of life and situations because God loves us and is working in and through us.

Now, as we enter verses 4-6 this morning, I do want you to see what a right view of things entails. In my translation, verse 4 begins with "Little children." Whenever John wants to emphasize a point, he begins with "Little children." But this phrase is a common phrase that signifies affection. Just as Jesus welcomed the little children, and said the Kingdom of Heaven is comprised of "little children," so John is giving his readers assurance. He's also stating a part of their identity. They are *God's* children. Meaning, we're not strong and all-powerful, but our Father is. Our Father is God! This is such a fitting phrase in this context. The Christians are struggling under the weight of false teachers and people leaving their gathering. They're confused and feel weak, and John doesn't say, "No, you're not weak! You're powerful." No. He says, "You are little children. You are vulnerable."

This reminds me of Jesus' words when he tells the disciples that he's sending them into the world like sheep among wolves. Wait a second, Jesus! Can't you make us like lions so that the wolves are afraid of us? No. That's not how God works in his children. He chooses the weak things of the world to confound the strong. He wants us to boast in him, in the midst of our weaknesses. Why? Because our greatest satisfaction and hope is found when we glory in his glory – not ours!

So, in this world where we see so many things falling apart, do we tell ourselves we're strong? No! We say, "I'm just a child," but we also say, "But I'm God's child!" What hope. I am weak, but he is *strong!* And because of him, you and I can endure whatever difficulties and trials that come our way – and we can glorify God!

Now, taking the two points John has spoken of, we can say that if we can be discerning with what people are saying about Jesus, that's not because of us and our smarts. Children aren't always the greatest at discerning. Our discernment, if correct, is given to us because of God's great love for us. He's given us the wisdom! Praise his name! And the same is true for the next evaluator for false prophets. So, let's jump into verses 4-6. Will we examine the character of those who listen to people's messages?

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 37:8.

Now, we can move to the first point of the sermon. There's only two main points and they're very basic. The first is:

### 1. Those from God listen to those from God (vv. 4, 6).

Let's read verses 4 and 6 together now: <sup>4</sup> 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. . . . <sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

Start with verse 6: We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us. This goes back to the illustration I gave at the beginning of the sermon. I knew my mom and dad's voices. Because I'm their child, I listened to them. Another adult could speak, but none carried the weight of my dad and mom. You could extend this and even talk about siblings. You know your siblings voices. You know their mannerisms. You know when a sibling came to you and said, "Dad said get home now," they were representing dad! You listened. But if you're not a part of the family, you would ignore it. A kid could say to their sibling, "Dad said come home now for dinner," and you don't pick up your bike and follow with urgency. That's their dad, not yours.

So, the second test for discerning a false prophet from a follower in Jesus is noticing *who people listen to*. Do you listen to God's people or do you listen to the world? If you primarily listen to God's people, then John says

**We are from God (vv. 4, 6).** As we learned in chapter 3, through faith in Jesus, God has changed us and made us his very own children. Oh, I know I say this every week, but we need the reminder daily: if you have known your utter weakness and incapability to be perfect. If you know that you couldn't do enough to get God to clear you of your guilt and shame. And, if you have encountered Jesus and discovered that he took the place for sinners on the cross – taking their guilt and shame. And if you've turned to God, saying, "I can't, but he did! Forgive me." He freely and fully forgives and also draws you into his loving arms and transforms you into his child. That means, now you are protected, loved, cared for, eternally graced. And, being from God means you know can speak for God in this world.

This is more clearly emphasized by John when he says **Whoever knows God listens to us**. Who's the "us" here? Some think it's the apostles, but I don't think that fits the context here. I believe John is using "us" to refer to all of God's children. Some might find this to be an arrogant statement. Can I just say to someone, "If you don't listen to me, you're not listening to God"? I mean, if I'm quoting Scripture, maybe. But I think John is emphasizing the community of believers here.

Again think about my family illustration. Like a child being sent to another child to declare what dad said, you and I have this privilege! And this is spoken of elsewhere in Scripture. I think of Matthew 18, when Jesus speaks about church discipline. Notice in Matthew 18 that Jesus doesn't say, "If the person repents, then stop the process." He says, "If he listens." If God's people are faithful to the Lord, they will speak on behalf of God to other professing Christians. If those professors refuse to listen, Jesus says then treat them as a tax collector. Listening is very important.

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<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:4, 6.

Why? Because God has designed to work through his children to build up, encourage, confront, strengthen his children. I think of Paul who said that our words are to minister grace to the hearer. Who's grace are we ministering? It's God's grace! Because of Jesus, God has made us ministers of his grace to one another. If someone refuses to listen to us, when we are Spirit-filled, they are closing their hearts to God's work. Again, I know that might sound arrogant, but it's only arrogant if we think we're the strong ones. We're the ones with all the answers. If that's our thought, then we're really not pointing to the Savior. We are little children. We are utterly dependent on the Lord.

So, let me ask you a few questions. First, do you know Jesus? Have you turned from your sins to him and found forgiveness and reconciliation? If you haven't, I pray you'd call out to him today. If you have, do know that you are *from God!* You are a representative of the Father to the world and to fellow Christians. Speak!

As a result of this, John says to the 1<sup>st</sup> century audience **Therefore, we have overcome false prophets (v. 4)**. How does this logic work? Well, John is saying to the readers that they didn't believe the lies of the false prophets! They overcame the trials because 1) they are from God, and 2) they, as God's children, listened to God's children. The same is true for us. If you or I have not succumbed to heresy and fallen away, it's not because of how great we are. It's because God has made us overcomers! That's the emphasis of John in this verse isn't it? Read the ending with me again: [you] have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.<sup>3</sup> He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

Think back to what I said earlier. We look at the problems of the church and the world and we can tend to fear. But fear only tends to evil! John doesn't resort to fear. He honestly acknowledges the difficulties, but he then honestly and truthfully reveals to us the God who is more powerful than the sinful world. Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world. Who is the "he" here that is in us? According to the context, I believe John is specifically referencing the Holy Spirit because the earlier verses are speaking of discerning between the spirit of the antichrist or the Spirit of God.

If you have trusted in Jesus, the third member of the Godhead resides in you. Do you have anything to be afraid of? You might say, "Well yes! There's a lot of problems. There's struggles and difficulties. I'm afraid of those." I get it. I've had many struggles physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. So many. And they're ongoing in my life. I often experience a multitude all at once. But through the decades, I've begun to increasingly to discover that when I know and am confident that the good, all-powerful, and immensely loving God is with me, I can rest. I may be in the storm, like the disciples, but Jesus is just as in control of the storm while sleeping then when he is awake. God's love and comfort never changes. He's in control. So, fear won't help. Leaning into the Lord is the safest place. And knowing that he's always with me is of utmost comfort. That means he sees me, knows me, cares for me, and will bring me all the way home to Heaven someday – and everything we go through will not be wasted by the Holy, Holy, Holy Triune God.

The Holy Spirit is more powerful than wrong doctrine, right? The Holy Spirit is more powerful than people trying to divide a church, right? The Holy Spirit is more powerful than sin, right? The Holy Spirit is more powerful than the world trying to deceive more people to believe their lies, right? Yes! Let's say that emphatically together. Yes, he is! Fret not yourselves, it tends only to evil.

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<sup>3</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:4.

If you're here today, trusting in Jesus, praise the Lord. You are an overcomer. You have overcome! Keep overcoming! So, in testing the spirits, we can look at Christians and say that they take the words of fellow Christians seriously. And if you see someone who takes the words of Christians seriously, that gives some evidence that they themselves may be (or probably are) a Christian, too. This then leads to the second point:

## 2. **Those from the world listen to those from the world (vv. 5-6).**

Let's read verse 5 and the end of verse 6 now: <sup>5</sup>They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. . . . [W]hoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.<sup>4</sup>

By this test we know the Spirit of truth (the Holy Spirit) from the spirit of error (the antichrist). Who do you listen to? Are you known for taking the words of Christians (not just currently, but throughout the ages) seriously? Do you take the New Testament seriously (which are the words of the apostles that Jesus said would speak the truth and teach all the Spirit wanted us to know). Or, do you primarily listen to the world? If you primarily listen to the world then,

**You are from the world (v. 5).** The "they" is referring to people who speak lies about Jesus. Remember that I stated last week (and even a couple months ago) that antichrist doesn't simply mean someone who blatantly and overtly denies Jesus. This term can refer to someone who gives a different version of Jesus – which really isn't Jesus. I'm still intrigued by the words of C.S. Lewis when he noted that every other world religion is essentially the same. It focuses on man's effort as a way to attain. Christianity is altogether different. We're saved by grace through faith in Jesus.

This serves as a perfect example of what John emphasizes here. Non-Christians disagree about a lot of things. Political viewpoints, moral standards, religious views. But when it all boils down, they're all in agreement with what they reject, or should I say "who they reject?" They deny essential realities about Jesus being the Messiah who came to destroy sin and bring forgiveness to sinners so people can be reconciled with God and all creation restored for eternity. This rejection, this sin, leads to all various types of sins.

I'm reminded of Romans 1 when I think of this. The world is comprised of all manners of evil. Why? They worship and serve the creature more than the Creator. Why? Because at the heart, they are sinners. Being from the world means they're sinful. They're dead in their sins and blind to reality. If you primarily listen to the world for counsel on life and righteousness, you reveal you're a child of the world. You're a child of the antichrist.

This childhood will also be expressed through you. John says **You speak from the world.** Again, going back to Romans 1, Paul says that the sinful world doesn't listen to the Creator. They listen to one another, and they not only do all these sinful things, but they give hearty approval to those who do these things.

People in the world become parrots for the demonic realm. Therefore, the world listens to the world. Is that you? Are you a part of the world? Do you just parrot the talking points of other human beings without thought of the Lord and King Jesus? If that's you, that's dangerous. John stated earlier that And

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<sup>4</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 4:5-6.

the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.<sup>5</sup> If you are from the world, and live according to the world, you will die with it. And as John says in this passage, those who overcome the false prophets are those who trust Jesus. As Jesus states, every human will be judged by God. To some, he will say depart. To others, he will welcome. Will you trust yourself or will you turn from your sin and trust Jesus? Ask yourself now, who most influences your life? Who or what do you live for? Is it Jesus? Then, who are you talking to and with?

But I again want to emphasize here that these two tests John gives here are meaningless if you personally don't know the love of Jesus, and love him. I mentioned the Spirit's words to the Ephesian church from Revelation, and I want to read more of the passage here as we come to a close of the sermon today.

**<sup>2</sup> “ 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. <sup>3</sup> I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup> But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup> Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. <sup>6</sup> Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” <sup>6</sup>**

You know the context of Ephesus? The Nicolaitans probably referred to sexual perversions. Ephesians had a godly hatred for it. I believe we here at Ventura have a godly hatred for all sorts of sexual perversions in our culture. I believe we also probably have many in our church who are discernment, and we try to grow in discerning the truth from lies. We can help each other in this. At this point, though, we could become quite prideful and say, “Well, we passed John's test! We have right doctrine, and we listen to each other.” But we can't take John's words here out of the broader context of his letter. Love is a central theme for the letter, and clearly this is God's heart, too. To the Ephesians, they could have said the same thing, but they abandoned the love they had at first.

So, again, I want to ask you, “How's your love for the Lord?” If it's not there. If it's waned. If you've abandoned it and just said, “I'll fake it til I make it,” you'll never recover. You need to pray and go back to the Lord and even ask others to pray for and with you in this. This is desperately serious because the Spirit says he'll take the lampstand away from the church if the love isn't restored. Why? Because without love for God, all works are a resounding gong and a clanging symbol. Without God's out-of-this-world, unique love working through us, we're just like the world. We're just making noise in our own strength and not depending on him.

**Oh, how I pray everyone here knows and loves Jesus. I pray that on the basis of his love for you, you would test the spirits and keep Jesus the main thing! I pray you would test the spirits and examine who people are listening to. I pray you would test the spirits and even test your own heart. Who do you listen to? Who do you love?**

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<sup>5</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 2:17.

<sup>6</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Re 2:2–7.