

Testing for the Spirit of Truth

Easter 5

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1 John 4:1-11

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

How do we test the spirits? It may seem that it was much easier back in the times of the apostles. We've heard before about the Gnostics, that group that was so-named because they came claiming to have a quote-unquote "special knowledge" that the apostles did not have. One piece of that so-called "special knowledge" was that Jesus had not come in literal flesh. In multiple passages and in multiple ways, the apostles, including Paul, warned the believers of their time not to believe anyone who came preaching or teaching anything contrary to what they were teaching—especially if that were a preaching or teaching which did not recognize that Jesus came "in the flesh," as we heard again in our text this morning.

That was then and this is now. Does Gnosticism—that idea about Jesus not having come in the flesh—even exist anymore? And if it does, is it still infiltrating our faith today? And what about other religions or denominations? Are all of them wrong? In adult Bible Class, we've been studying about other religions and other denominations, some of which sound very much like our own.

Well, where should we turn to answer these questions? Where else but the Word? As Peter rightly confessed: "'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life (John 6:68b).'"

Let us, then, turn to our Epistle text and see what the Lord would say about other religions.

Verse 1

Our Lord Jesus, through His apostle John, tells and warns us: "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. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 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."

Here again we hear about that Gnostic heresy. But again, does Gnosticism even still exist? And if it does, does it seep into our religion today? Let's consider: the Gnostics claimed that Jesus did not actually come in the flesh. The reason they claimed for this was that all matter was evil; and that, therefore, the good God would never have come in the flesh. More than that, because the Old Testament God created matter and did some things we might raise our eyebrows at, they claimed that He must not actually be the true God. Instead, they claimed that the Old Testament God was evil; while Jesus was the true, and good, God. And He did not come in the flesh, but only appeared to, for the purpose of showing us how to escape this life of matter and flesh. That's what the Gnostics would have said.

But again, does anyone say anything similar today? Do we ever consider similar thoughts? We most certainly look forward to the part of our lives which will be lived in heaven, in the Throne Room of God. Yet we believe that even the current part of our lives is a blessing from God as well. That's why we still proclaim that life is a gift from God and pray against abortion. And in this life—even in the midst of struggle—we live with the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, which no one can take from us. So while we may have to endure struggles, we are living with God even here and now.

More than that, God created us to have bodies, and we look forward not only to our time with Him in His Throne Room in heaven, but also to the end of the story: the new heavens and new earth which God has promised to us in the book of Revelation. When we get caught up in those struggles, though, have we ever thought how much better it would be to leave this life and go on to heaven? Even Paul has had those thoughts.

Remember in his letter to the Philippians? Paul wrote: "...I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account (Php 1:19-24)." So you hear, life lived in the body is not evil, as the Gnostics or even some antichrists today may claim, but in fact it has its purpose: that we may serve each other in fruitful ways. More than that, it means that there are not two Gods, one evil and one good, but that there is only one God, and He continues to speak His Word of warning to us in our next verses.

Verse 2

"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. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. 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."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, "you are from God and have overcome them." You have been called by God in the waters of Baptism and through His Word. Your body is now the temple of the Holy Spirit. Others listen to the world and the words and lies of the Gnostics and the other messengers of the antichrist; but not you. You listen to God's Word. "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."

You have received the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit works through the Word of God that you hear to keep you in the one true faith. It is "By this" hearing God's Word and the Spirit working through that Word that we know "the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

We know that Scripture backs up Scripture; and we know that it will not go well for those who add to or take away anything from the Scriptures. That's what God has told us at the end of the book of Revelation. So we listen to the Word of God in its full truth and purity. We also reject taking away from the Scriptures and adding to them, as the Gnostics and others do out of error.

So the Gnostics and other workers of the antichrist may be tested for by their doctrines—whether they line up with the Scriptures. But what do the Scriptures tell us is the truth? What is our central doctrine? That's what God reveals to us in the conclusion of our text.

Verse 3

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."

Why does our doctrine come from the Scriptures? So that we might have life through Jesus. We do not find life in the antichrists, even if they appear to love. As God tells us: "In this is love, not that we have loved (Him), but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." What is more, God loves us—

not because we sought Him out, but rather because He sought us out since He Himself is love. He sought us out in His great love, and in His great love, He sent His only begotten Son into the flesh to live, to die for our sins, and to rise again bodily. Yet there are not two Gods, but one God, who has the persons of both Father and Son. And He has done this so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. And that we might have abundant life not only in the life to come in heaven and the heavens and earth to come, but even here and now.

Yes, here and now we may face struggles and have to constantly be wary of false prophets and the antichrist, but here also we are given the opportunity to love each other as we have been loved by God in His Son Jesus Christ. We are in the Word; and the Holy Spirit, the third person of God, is working through the Word to keep us in the faith and so that we might love.

As we heard from Paul earlier, it is far better to be with God, but until such time as He calls us home, it is good and necessary to serve one another in love—the love of Christ Jesus, who is in you. Brothers and sisters, do not fear the world or the antichrist—“he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” God is in you and will not leave you or forsake you, for He is love, as He has shown through sending His Son to die for you. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.