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1 John 4:1-6

Sixth Message

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# TO WHOM ARE YOU LISTENING?

*SERIES: WHAT GREAT LOVE*

In April of 1966 TIME magazine famously asked the question “Is God Dead?” on their front cover. Though the answer for many is still in question, the growth of “religion” over the past four and a half decades is beyond question. While I was down in San Diego visiting family over the holidays I read an article titled “One nation, under Gods” in the Los Angeles Times. In the article, author Eric Weiner declares, “God is definitely not dead – but God has diversified.”<sup>1</sup>

Referring to the results of a recent Pew Forum on Religion and Public life, Weiner finds that the United States is a

...spiritually promiscuous nation... beliefs once considered exclusive to the New Age movement have seeped into the mainstream. Twenty percent of Christians say they believe in reincarnation. An equal percentage believe in astrology and in yoga – not only as exercise but as a spiritual practice.

He goes on to say that there is no such thing as a “pure” religion. All faiths are hybrids, to one degree or another, and we are better off for it because we recognize familiar themes in other religions and are therefore more accepting of all faiths.

This is the spiritual and religious landscape in which you and I live, with people believing religions are all pretty much the same, so just find the one that seems to fit you best. Better yet, take the parts of whatever religion seems right to you, blend it all together, and make your own hybrid faith.

The last few weeks we have been reflecting on important themes found in 1 John. In particular we have focused on the wonderful truth that God is love. Through the sending of his Son Jesus Christ in whom we have life, and by the giving of his Holy Spirit who dwells within us, we are able to drink deeply of God’s love and lay down our life for one another with compassion and generosity.

In our love for one another however, we must not be naïve or blind to the underlying foundation and principles of this world.

We have an enemy, and that enemy wishes to distort the truth. As Jesus said, the evil one

**...was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).**

We must be equipped to discern the truth from a lie, to combat all forms of evil that seek to corrupt our faith and divide us as a unified and loving community of believers.

The letter of 1 John was written to a community of believers under such a siege. Certain individuals who had been part of John’s church were proclaiming a very dangerous and false teaching, causing a great deal of uncertainty and confusion among the believing community. In our text today we will hear John exhort his flock, and us, to exercise much needed discernment when encountering people claiming to speak in the name of God.

**Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)**

Those who distort the truth for their own gain are not rare. Warnings about false prophets operating within the Christian community are found throughout the New Testament. Jesus himself said, “false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order to lead astray, if possible, the elect.” (Mark 13:22). These teachers are frauds, and their lies are not harmless.

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is so precious that those who seek to lead others away from the truth are described in the harshest terms. Jesus warned his followers, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” (Matthew 7:15).

To appreciate the depth of the problem in the early church we must remember that most of these congregations were house churches spread throughout the Roman Empire. In the early years no one owned a “New Testament.” At best they had random collections of letters from the apostles and collections of stories about Jesus. Oral communication was essential.

These house churches relied on representatives from their pastors and leaders to relay information and teaching. Paul sent out Timothy and Silas in this capacity, and John also sent out trustworthy and respected individuals as his spokespersons.

Problems would arise when certain individuals would claim inspiration or authority that was not rightfully theirs. The members of his flock could fall prey to these unscrupulous teachers, so it was necessary for John to equip them to be ready at all times to evaluate the message they heard and the spirit that inspired it. They must not be easy prey for the wolves. They must not be naïve or gullible when it comes to submitting themselves to the message and spiritual authority of others.

How are they to weigh the message of the various prophetic voices they hear? How are they to know if what is being said is from God or from a worldly point of view? John provides them with a test they can use to distinguish those who are from God from those who are not. The criteria is first stated positively (to identify those who are from God) and then negatively (to identify those who are not of God):

**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)**

John says we can recognize the Spirit of God within a teacher if their message glorifies Jesus Christ as the Son of God come in

the flesh. Jesus himself made it clear that the Spirit of God always glorifies the Son of God:

**But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. (John 16:13-14)**

This disclosure of the truth that Jesus Christ is the Son of God come in the flesh is so foundational that John begins his gospel with these words: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). There is no gospel, there is no good news, without Jesus Christ Son of God coming in the flesh, bearing upon himself our sin that we may live through him. Any other understanding of Jesus is no understanding of Jesus at all.

Those who claim to speak for God but will not confess Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God and will not worship him as Lord are liars. They have the same view, the same spirit, of the antichrist. As John says, “Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist — he denies the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22).

This is a direct challenge to the message of the false teachers who were threatening John’s flock. These false prophets, these early Gnostics, believed that our flesh is of no importance and at worst evil. They considered only that which is spirit to be truly good, so they believed that the Holy God would never come in the flesh. They denied that Jesus Christ was fully divine and fully human. There was no such thing as sin, and no need therefore for a Savior. Rather than looking to Jesus Christ as the only way to God they sought after inspired spiritual experiences and greater enlightenment.

Does that ring a bell? Does that sound familiar, like what you hear from our modern-day spiritual leaders? From ancient teachings to modern cults, there are many prophets and spirits claiming spiritual enlightenment. John’s command that we “test the spirits” is so important and relevant for our generation because there are so many claims to religious truth today. Challenges to the gospel are everywhere we turn. Let me share with you a small, but popular, sampling of the voices out there today.

On the Amazon.com best-seller list of books on Jesus is a book titled “The Yoga of Jesus: Understanding the Hidden Teachings of the Gospels.” Author Paramhansa Yogananda writes:

Lest His benighted children be lost forever in creation’s delusive labyrinths, the Lord comes again and again in God-illuminated prophets to light the way...Jesus was preceded by Gautama Buddha, who reminded a forgetful generation of the Dharma Chakra, who was preceded by Bhagavan Krishna”... In his little human body called Jesus was born the vast Christ Consciousness, the omniscient Intelligence of God omnipresent in every part and particle of creation.<sup>2</sup>

In a recent Oprah’s book-club selection, “A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose” by New York Times best-selling author Eckhart Tolle, I found this: “The Truth is inseparable from who you are. Yes, you are the Truth...Jesus speaks of the innermost I Am, the essence identity of every man and woman, every life-form...Some Christian mystics have called it the Christ within; Buddhists call it your Buddha nature; for Hindus, it is Atman, the indwelling God. When you are in touch with that dimension within yourself all your

actions and relationships will reflect the oneness with all life that you sense deep within. This is love.”<sup>3</sup>

A top hit on the Web is a site called “Our Path to God.” They do away with Jesus altogether: The road to enlightenment begins with a spiritual awakening drawing you to find the higher power which binds all, eventually leading you to your higher purpose. Once you achieve your higher purpose, the road will end in a fulfilled, blissful state of love and inner peace. Let God’s love light the way along your path to inner peace”<sup>4</sup>

It all sounds kind of familiar doesn’t it? Their language mimics the language of God. There is mention of truth, Jesus, the indwelling God, peace, and love but it is a dangerous distortion of the gospel. The voice of the false prophets reflecting the spirit of the antichrist can sound very religious and spiritual, but they are not the truth. Jesus states unequivocally, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). Any prophet, teacher, or message that compromises that truth is not from God.

If there is no Jesus Christ who died for us and cleanses us, if there is no Holy Spirit alive and active within us, then there is no “good news.” There is only achieving our “higher purpose, our blissful state of love and inner peace” through our own efforts and some kind of magical enlightenment. This leads only to disillusionment, disappointment, and death.

It is not just the far-out and wacky proclamations we must be discerning about. Any voice that diminishes the nature and work of Jesus Christ can be trouble. These are the voices that in subtle and not so subtle ways steer us toward the belief that Jesus is not enough. In order to be fully loved by God and receive the “full” blessing of God, we need Jesus plus tithing a certain amount; Jesus plus fasting frequently; Jesus plus praying a certain kind of prayer. This “Jesus plus” mentality is dangerous. It places our efforts on equal footing as the atoning work of Christ. This is not good news; this is not the gospel.

How are we to weigh the message of the various prophetic voices we hear? John says we must test what they say about the nature and work of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and the spirit of antichrist does not. We must not give their word any weight, and we must not be seduced by their promises.

So what voices should we be listening to? John answers that question next:

**You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. (1John 4:4-6)**

No matter how crafty and convincing the false teachers might be John wants to reassure his flock that they do not need to live in fear of being deceived by the spirit of falsehood. They are children of God who have overcome the false prophets because the Spirit of truth dwells within them.

The false teachers are from the world, expressing the viewpoint of the world, so there should be no surprise that their message becomes

popular in the world. Just because a person's teaching finds a warm reception by a great many people in the world does not make it true.

However widespread and popular the lies of the world might be, they cannot compete with the Spirit of truth. It's not even a fair fight. The one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world. As the Apostle Paul said:

**We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. (1Cor. 2:12).**

The Spirit of truth exposes the lies of the world and leads us into the truth about what God has so generously and freely given us. What an amazing gift!

Not only that, we also have the testimony of the disciples to guide us. When John says, "we are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us," I believe he is referring to Jesus' disciples. These are the ones John describes at the very beginning of his letter as those whose ears have heard Jesus, whose eyes have seen and whose hands have touched Jesus.

They are the ones who have testified about Jesus Son of God come in the flesh and now proclaim it for the entire world to hear.

**The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:2-3).**

Their testimony about Jesus as the Son of God come in the flesh can be trusted and relied upon. When confronted with the spirit of falsehood, we not only have the Spirit of truth within us but also the testimony of the disciples.

In his exhortation to his disciple Timothy, Paul emphasizes the importance of God's word:

**In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2Tim. 3: 12-17)**

Our familiarity with God's word is a fantastic help in determining the origin and authenticity of any message that comes our way. Early in our marriage, my wife Amy worked as an assistant manager at a local bank. Part of her training included discerning a fake bill from a real one. They focused not so much on trying to identify the multitude of false currency out there, but focused instead on becoming so familiar with the real thing – the size, the feel, the weight, the color – that when the counterfeit crossed their path they were more likely to recognize it.

I believe it is this kind of intimacy and familiarity with God and his word that Jesus alludes to when he describes how God's people know his voice, like sheep with their shepherd:

**He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice. (John 10:3-5)**

How are we to know if what is being said is from God or from the spirit of falsehood? Does it resonate with the Spirit of truth that is within you? Does what you hear agree with the testament of Scriptures?

As we have seen the last few weeks, John has very specifically laid out for us the message of the gospel. Our God, who is love, sent his one and only Son in the flesh to atone for our sins and draw us into fellowship with Him. He has given us the gift of his Spirit who dwells within us and produces the fruit of love for one another. With such a precious message, we must be careful and discerning that no wayward teaching leads us astray and robs us of the life-giving truth that is ours as children of God.

We must "test the spirits" just as John has prescribed. Such testing is the responsibility of every Christian, every congregation, and every generation of believers. So we must ask ourselves, "To whom are we listening? Am I giving weight to any voices that water-down the gospel of Christ? Where am I most vulnerable to compromise the truth simply to look like and sound like the world around me?"

Am I listening to God? Am I taking time to get away from all the worldly voices that bombard me every day so that I can allow the Word of God and the Spirit of God to speak to me? Jesus said, "*and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*" (John 8:32). May we give thanks to our God the author of truth. May we listen to his voice and may we live joyfully and freely in his love.

*"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word."*  
(2Th. 2:16-17)

1. Eric Weiner, *One nation, under Gods*; Los Angeles Times; December 26, 2011.
2. Paramhansa Yogananda, *The Yoga of Jesus: Understanding the Hidden Teachings of the Gospels*, (Self-Realization Fellowship; Los Angeles, California, 2007), 4-5.
3. Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*; Penguin Group; New York, New York; 2006), 71-72.
4. <http://www.ourpathtogod.com>

