

SERMON FOR MAY 2, 2021

TEXT: 1 JOHN 4: 1-6

THEME: TESTING THE SPIRITS

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. **2** By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, **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. **4** 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. **5** They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. **6** 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.

In the name of Jesus:

I had a part time job when I got into college, the job as a salesman at Forest City Lumber in Cleveland. Forest City was like our Lowes, Menarads, or Home Depot. It specialized in selling lumber, but was really a home improvement store. There was a fellow employee who specialized in selling and designing kitchens. His name was Neil Rodgers. I don't know whatever happened to him, but he said something that, when I heard it at first, alarmed me, but when I got to thinking about it, it made sense.

I asked him about the particular kitchen cabinets that Forest City sold. He called them junk. Junk, not worth the money the people were going to pay for them. I asked him to explain and this is what he said, and his explanation

had stuck with me to this day: “What we sell here is ‘imitation quality.’ It is made to look good, but it isn’t worth the money that people will spend on it. Imitation quality, it isn’t what it appears to be.”

I have thought a lot about that statement since. And that phrase, imitation quality, gets at what the Apostle John is writing about in our text for today. For John writes: 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. **2** By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, **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. “

John exhorts us to test the spirits. There are true spirits and there are false spirits. There is a Spirit who gives life, and then there is a spirit that threatens and leads to death. So John gives you and me a warning, that not everything that seems to represent the Spirit of God really does so. In other words, there is a false spirit that offers imitation quality, there is the true Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, and then there are other spirits, unholy spirits, spirits that are not from God which seek your harm and destruction.

Hence, John encourages us to “test the spirits” because many false prophets, false teachers, have gone forth to proclaim all sorts of things. Every

prophet, pastor, or teacher, is a mouthpiece of either the unholy spirits or of the Holy Spirit. Behind each spirit there is either the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, or the unholy spirits, the spirit of the devil. The Holy Spirit will deal with the truth, while the spirit of the devil will abound in lies and deceptions. John tells us that it is inevitable that we will face the challenges and lies of these false spirits, in fact, he calls them antichrist.

There is even a great deal of false teaching and misinformation about antichrist today even in Christian circles. Some in the Church circulate this wild misconception that everyone in the future will be wearing the mark of the Beast, 666, on their forehead when antichrist comes. But John says that antichrist is already here. What does antichrist even mean?

It means what it says. Antichrist means against Christ, against Jesus. So when John speaks of antichrist and of the spirit of antichrist already being here, he is telling us that there are spirits who are against Christ, or anti-Christ. Another way to think of this is that antichrist is not just against Christ, but antichrist speaks and teaches a doctrine other than Christ. And this doctrine, this teaching that is against Christ, that is opposed to Christ and is other than Christ leads to death. It is not of God, and every spirit that does not confess or teach this is the spirit of antichrist, is a spirit of lies and deceit, and it is a spirit that leads to death and separation from God.

Just as you can tell a tree by its fruits, you can distinguish between the false and true Spirit by its fruit. Paul explains that the desires of the flesh are opposed to the Holy Spirit and that these desires are the things which the false spirits seek to bring forth: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, **20** idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, **21** envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”(Gal. 5: 19-21).

John, instead, encourages us to follow the Holy Spirit, who will lead us into the truth of Jesus Christ. The truth of Christ is this: That God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, He is the only begotten Son of God. It was God’s will not to condemn the world but to save the world in Christ. So Jesus came to be born, to suffer, die, and rise again for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal salvation for all who believe. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. For we have been saved by grace, through faith in Christ, created by Him to glorify God by living by the Holy Spirit and doing the works of God. And these works are the fruits of the Spirit, also explained by Paul as: “**22** love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. **24** And those who belong to

Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Gal 5: 22-24).

John reminds you and me that “you are from God.” God has made us His own in the waters of Baptism. There is Baptism He has called us by name, and you belong to Him. He has placed the mark of Christ upon you, forgiving you all of your sins. You have been reborn. Christ, who has risen from the grave, and who now lives before the Father in heaven, has given to you new life in Him by the power of His Spirit. Jesus has conquered the devil and all of his evil companions, Jesus has overcome death and the devil in His rising again from the grave.

So the hallmark of the Spirit of truth tells us that Jesus Christ is the true God and Man, that He, as we confess in the Creed, came down from heaven for us men and for our salvation. This is the plain, simple truth, that Jesus is the Way, Truth and Life and that no one comes to the Father except by believing in Jesus Christ.

So it is the purpose of the false spirits to deal in deception. They seek to alter or change this truth, to bring it into question, so that doubts and fears enter your heart and your life. But God wants you to live in peace, so that the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will keep you in the love of

Christ. That is why we are called to test the spirits, to not believe every spirit, because there are false spirits and then there is the true Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

So how do we receive the Holy Spirit? You received the Holy Spirit in Baptism. And how does the Holy Spirit come to you to keep you believing in Jesus and so that you can know truth from deception? By remaining in the Word, by your continually coming to Church to hear God's Word and to receive the Lord's Supper. This is what it means to abide in Him, to abide in Jesus, for Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit so that we abide or we live in Christ. Jesus is the Vine, we are the branches, whoever abides in Christ and Christ abides in him, that person will bear much fruit for Him and thereby show His love for the Lord, by living in the love of the Lord and then showing that love by loving others even as Jesus has loved us.

Whoever knows the Lord listens to the Lord speak through His Word. Whoever doesn't know the Lord doesn't listen to Him. When we are in the Word the Spirit speaks to us, He fills us with faith in Christ and love for Jesus and others. And the same Spirit, who leads us in the truth of Jesus' love, empowers us to live our lives in love, bearing fruit for that will show others the reality of God's love for them in Jesus. Amen