

December 13, 2015 by Steve Brandon



Truth and Error

1 John 4:1-6

1. Test the Spirits (verses 1-3).

2. Know Your Source (verses 4-6).

We live in the information age. Information is all around us. It is in front of us. It is on our computers. It is in our pockets. Within a few minutes, you can have answers to a billion different questions. From geography to sports to history to science to entertainment; all of this information is at your fingertips.

How tall is Mount Everest? 29,029 feet. How many home runs did Roger Maris hit in his career? 275. What was Napoleon's birthday? August 15, 1769. What is the atomic mass of fluorine? 18.998404 amu. Who played Clarence in "It's a Wonderful Life"? Henry Travers. When was the first Star Wars movie released? May 25, 1977. How far away is Betelgeuse from the earth? 640 light years. Who was the third prime minister of Australia? Chris Watson.

But, not only can you find out trivial facts, you can find some very useful instructional videos as well. This past year, I have to look at fixing a dryer that's not working. Installing a hitch onto your car. Increasing the pressure of our reverse osmosis water purification system. Installing an electric dog fence.

Furthermore, you can get all sorts of information on your friends. In fact, I was on Facebook last night and found out a bunch of things about all of you. I found out that just yesterday a husband and children made birthday cake for their wife and mother yesterday. Whose 10 year anniversary was this past week. Who made a ninja turtle Christmas ornament this week. Who likes to listen to the Osmonds at Christmas time. Who received a Keurig as an early Christmas present. Who made a homemade Christmas wreath. Who finished her reading book on Friday. Who had strep throat this week.

Not only can you get answers to factual questions. Not only can you find help with home repairs. Not only can you find out a bunch of things about your friends. But, you can get all sorts of opinions about right and wrong, about social issues, about politics, about heaven and hell, about Moses and Jesus, about aliens, about conspiracies, about end-times events, about getting to heaven.

And one of the things that we greatly need today is a spirit of discernment. Because -- news flash -- not everything that you read on the internet is true. Not everything that you hear from other people is true. Facebook is a place where lies abound! We aren't really that happy all the time. People link to articles and pictures that aren't always true. People comment and say things that just aren't true.

Not everything that you hear from preachers is true. Just because someone is preaching with a Bible in his hand doesn't make it true.

And our text this morning calls us to discern between truth and error. It calls us to not believe everything simply because someone said it. Or because you read it on the internet. Or because you heard someone say it. Or because someone who is nice said it.

Well, if you haven't done so already, I invite you to open your Bibles to 1 John. In our exposition of this great book, we have arrived at chapter 4. We will be looking at the first four verses.

1 John 4:1-6

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 that 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. 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.

I have entitled my message this morning, "Truth and Error." You can see in the last part of verse 6 how I arrived at the title. John writes, ...

1 John 4:6

... By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

See, it's not only our day that requires discernment between truth and truth and error. It was a problem in John's day. Though, I would say that it's much more of a problem in our day.

So, how do you know the difference? John says, "By this."

1 John 4:6

... By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

I think that John is referring to our entire passage. It's verses 1-6 that give us guidance into the truth. It's verses 1-6 that give us guidance away from into error. So, let's dig into our passage. You want to know the difference between truth and error? Here's my first point:

1. Test the Spirits (verses 1-3).

I trust that you can see that this is the clear command of verse 1.

1 John 4:1

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.

Actually, if you were paying attention, there are actually two commands in verse 1. The first is the negative: "Do not believe every spirit." And the second is positive: "Test the spirits to see whether they are from God."

But, the second command governs the first command. In other words, testing the spirits is the means to know which spirit you are to believe. If a spirit is from God, then you will believe it. If a spirit is not from God, then you will not believe it. Thus, you are doing exactly what the first command says: "Do not believe every spirit."

The reason why we are to test the spirits comes at the end of verse 1, "for many false prophets have gone out into the world." John's words here give you an idea of what he's talking about. He's not talking about some mystical spirit that floats around someplace. No, he's talking about people. He's talking about teachers. He's talking about prophets.

In 2 John, verse 7, he calls them "deceivers." And what was true of John's day is certainly true of our day. False prophets and deceivers abound in our day. They are all over the place. And the internet has given them a voice.

You might have in mind some big-name televangelists who do crusades or who have large churches. And this is certainly true. But, deceivers are all in smaller churches, too. Deceivers are also professors in colleges. Deceivers are also uncles who visit on Thanksgiving and Christmas time. Deceivers are also next door. Deceivers are also prone to go door to door spreading their lies.

Anyone who is teaching what is false can rightly be called a "deceiver." John focuses here on one area of deception that was true in his day. It has to do with Christmas. Look at verse 2, ...

1 John 4:2

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

This is practically the definition of Christmas. It's the time when Jesus Christ came in the flesh. Matthew described it this way: "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)" (Matthew 1:21-23).

John described it this way. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The expectation of the prophets, and the teaching of the apostles said the same thing: "God would come and visit us in the flesh." He will be called "Immanuel." He will be "God with us."

Because of our sin, we were hopeless and helpless. We couldn't save ourselves. We needed God to come and save us. And this he did in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ took on flesh and blood. And this is what we celebrate at Christmas time -- God coming in the flesh to dwell among us.

But, of course, it's beyond Jesus simply coming in the flesh, as if he appeared on the red carpet to make a star's appearance, only to leave again in his limousine. No, Jesus came with a purpose. He came to die. He came to die upon the cross to save us from our sins.

And this is our hope at Christmas, that this baby would grow to be a man. And this man would fulfill the law for us. And this man would die for our sins. And so we could be made right with God.

When Jesus came in the flesh,, he came to identify with us as humans. "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14).

Now, there were those in the days of the New Testament who denied this fact. They claimed that Jesus didn't come in the flesh. They claimed that he only appeared to come in the flesh. Today, we know the heresy as "docetism." It comes from the Greek word which means, "to seem or appear." The idea is that Jesus Christ only appeared to be human. His human form was only an illusion.

One of the driving reasons behind this was prevailing belief of the day (influenced heavily by the dualism of ancient Greek Philosophy) that viewed matter as inherently evil. Things of the spirit were ideal and good and perfect. Things of the flesh were impaired and evil and imperfect.

You can think of a perfectly straight line, but try to draw one and it will be crooked. You can think of a perfectly smooth surface, but try to create one and it will be rough.

So if God, who was perfectly good, was to come and dwell among us, then he, the perfect and infinite, certainly could not take on flesh and blood. That would be to mix perfect good with imperfect flesh. And for those influenced by this philosophy, they taught that Jesus only "appeared" to come in the flesh. They taught that Jesus was a shadow of reality. He was a sort of a ghost who looked human in every way. But, was really just a form of humanity.

Now, you have to catch what these people were doing. They had this underlying belief of dualism. Spirit is good. Matter is evil. God is infinitely good. Our flesh is evil.

Thus, for God to become flesh, it would mean that God would become corrupt. That can't be. Thus, it was only possible if God would appear to be flesh.

But, John said, "No." This is wrong! And anyone that taught that was certainly teaching in error. Listen again to verses 2 and 3.

1 John 4:2-3

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. ...

I bet you never realized how important Christmas was to right teaching. Because an attack on the person of Christ is an attack on the Christian faith.

Today the battle is the opposite. The struggle today in our world is not with the humanity of Jesus. The struggle today in our world is with the deity of Jesus. People will readily admit that Jesus was a great man! But, they find it difficult to believe that he was God!

In fact, a few weeks ago, I was visited at my door by someone who didn't believe in the deity of Jesus. Perhaps such people have visited your home as well. They are called, "Jehovah's witnesses." And they are every bit in error as were the docetists of John's day. In fact, were John writing today, he may well have written these verses like this, "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ [is the second person of the Triune God], and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God."

This is one way to Test the Spirits (verses 1-3). Test to see what sort of Christ a person believes in. It is of uttermost importance that you believe in the correct Jesus. Because, only the correct Jesus can save you from your sins.

It's as if you met up with an old high school friend, and talked about your friend, "Gus." And you were talking about what a great guy he was. And your friend was agreeing with you. And your friend was laughing at his long hippie-style hair, "I can't believe that that style was so in back then." And you say, "Gus? No, I remember that his dad was in the military and forced him to keep his hair in a crew cut."

And your friend says, "Yeah, well, I remember how Gus was a great football player." And you say, "Gus? A football player? He only weighed 140 pounds soaking wet."

And your friend says, "Yeah, I remember going to his house. It was huge! One of those big old mansions. We used to play hide and go seek in all of the rooms and swim in the pool." And you say, "Gus? No. He lived in the trailer park. And best I can remember, there was no pool in the trailer park."

What's the problem? You are talking about different guys! Your friend's "Gus" isn't your "Gus." And when it comes to Jesus, you need the real Jesus to save you from your sins. You can't believe in a faulty Jesus to save you.

Did you realize that cults always get this wrong? Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus was a created being, Michael the archangel, who became a man. Mormons believe that Jesus was a created being, the brother of the devil. Islam believes that Jesus was a created being, a prophet, but not God. Christian Science believes that Jesus was a man, a man in tune with the Divine Consciousness.^[1] Some have believed that Jesus was a man who became empowered by the Spirit at his birth or at his baptism.

So, this Christmas season, let's believe in the real Jesus. Let's believe in God who took on human flesh to save us from our sins. Certainly, there is mystery here. How can it be that God became a man? We will never know. But, we must believe if we will believe the Spirit of God (verse 2). This is the way of truth.

So let's Test the Spirits (verses 1-3). My second point this morning, ...

2. Know Your Source (verses 4-6).

This comes in verses 4-6.

1 John 4:4-6

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.

In verse 4, we find John, once again, affirming his readers. He affirms his affection for them by calling them "Little children." He does this often.^[2] He affirms their source. He says, "You are from God."

John knows his readers. And he's trying to give them assurance of their salvation. He is seeking to give them comfort that, indeed, they do know God. He has done this often.

1 John 2:20
But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.

1 John 2:27
But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you

1 John 3:2
Beloved, we are God's children.

Isn't this why John wrote?

1 John 5:13
I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

And here in verse 4, John is seeking to remind them that they are from God. Note the contrast in these verses. Let me read the first few words of each verse, ...

1 John 4:4-6
Little children, you are from God ... They are from the world; ... We are from God. ...

What John is seeking to do here is to present the contrast between his readers and those who are in the world. There is a big contrast. His readers (and all fellow believers by extension) are from God. Everyone else is from the world.

The best way to understand these verses is to begin in the middle. Let's begin with verse 5.

1 John 4:5
They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.

John is talking about those outside of Christ. He's talking about those outside the church. He's talking about the unbelievers. He's talking about your neighbors. He's talking about your co-workers. He's talking about your unsaved family. He's talking about the secular media. He's talking about Hollywood.

And these people ...

1 John 4:5
... speak from the world, and the world listens to them.

Is it any wonder that they speak of the world? They don't have the spirit of God. According to Ephesians 2, they don't have spiritual life in them. Is it any wonder that the world listens to them? Those in darkness follow darkness.

The world gives worldly people what they want. They want things? They give them things. They want adventure? They give them adventure. They want sex? They give them sex. They want lies? They give them lies. They want gossip? They give them gossip. They want gifts? They give them gifts. The contrast comes in verse 6.

1 John 4:6
We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us.

Now, certainly, this has apostolic precedence. Meaning that if you didn't listen to John, then you certainly were not from God. But, such is not the case with us. Just because someone doesn't listen to me doesn't mean that they are not from God. They may like how another pastor says it. That's fine.

But, the principle is this: When God's word is spoken, do people listen? Because, their listening is a sign of their source. If they are from God, they will listen. If they are not from God, they will not listen. Or, to say it better: If they are from God, they will heed and obey the word. If they are not from God, they will ignore the word and not care to do what it says.

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul said it very well. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). In other words, to those who are of the world, the word of the cross is foolish. A crucified Messiah? The baby at Christmas time? Born to die? It makes no sense. Who would send his son to die?

Mothers don't send their sons to war to die. They send them to fight and win and come back. But, God sent his son to die for our sins. It makes no sense to the world. Compound that to say that the way you enter the kingdom is through faith alone. Jesus accomplished it all on the cross.

That's utter foolishness to the world, where you work for everything you get. And then, to think of coming to God through faith and not by works? It's contrary to almost everything that the world knows. That's why it's foolishness.

But, "to us who are being saved [the word of the cross] is the power of God." In other words, when we hear of Jesus coming in the flesh and dying for our sins, we rejoice. When we hear that it's not through our efforts, but through the work of Jesus, and we are empowered to live a godly life, not out of obligation. Not from fear of condemnation. But through love for our Savior. This is the only true power -- motivation through desire and delight.

Paul continues on in 1 Corinthians 1. "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:22-4).

The Jews of Paul's day were into signs. "Show me and I will believe" is what they said. The Greeks of Paul's day were into wisdom. "Wow me with your wit and I will believe" is what they said. But, such is not the message we proclaim. We proclaim a crucified Savior, risen from the dead. But, we don't have tangible proof. The proof was 2,000 years ago when Jesus appeared alive to the disciples and changed their lives. That proof is sufficient for us. But, for many it's not. So they don't listen.

And our message isn't particularly intellectual to persuade the Greeks. It's simple enough that even children can understand.

Pity the church that seeks to pander to the world. It's a way to get a crowd. Pity the church that gives the crowd what they want -- a little bit of Jesus with a lot of the world.

I remember reading something that Steve Jobs said. He never gave customer surveys asking people what they wanted in a product. He basically said, "They don't know what they want. I know what they want. I will build it and tell them what they want. We will give them what they want and they will buy it!" That is exactly like the gospel. We don't give the message that people want. We know what people need -- they need the gospel! And we give them the gospel. The power of God is in the gospel.

1 John 4:4

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.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 13, 2015 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] <https://carm.org/cult-comparison-chart>

[2] 1 John 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7; 4:4; 5:21