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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Easter 5, Series B
Sunday, April 29th, 2018, 8 o'clock in the morning

Sermon: Testing the Spirits¹

Text: 1 John 4:1-11

Focus: The Incarnate Word saves us from our sins and false teaching.

Function: That they would “test the spirits” to discern whether preaching and teaching are true.

Structure: Verse-by-Verse

Locus: “... We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory” (SC, 6th Petition).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. “Test the spirits,” John tells us in our epistle lesson (1 John 4:11, ESV).² Test the spirits... What does that mean? (*Aside: I don't think he's telling us to sign up for a wine tasting!*) In today's Scripture, the apostle warns against the dangers of false prophets and how to discern whether or not a message is from God. I'd like for you to turn in your Bibles to First John, chapter 4, so we can explore this important teaching together. We begin with verse 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” (1 John 4:1). There's an old saying, “Don't believe everything you hear,” and another like it, “Don't believe everything you read in the newspaper”—or on the Internet! Everyone has an opinion—but not everyone is right! Not all opinions are created equal. And nowadays, with the Internet, Smartphones, and other instant communication, any yahoo or whacko can broadcast his lies, foolishness, or hate speech to millions of people.

¹ This is a revision of a sermon originally preached on May 6th, 2012, at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Sadly, this is true of our life together in the Church as well. Not every supposedly Christian denomination or congregation preaches and teaches the true Word of God. The liberal spirit of the times casts doubt on the authority of Scripture, and many Christians have rejected the correct, historical understandings of God's Word in favor of more "politically correct" messages. Televangelists such as Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer find success telling people what they want to hear, proclaiming a "prosperity gospel," which is really a terrible lie wrapped in a falsehood.

Even in our own congregation and circles of friends, we are apt to meet fellow believers who claim to have special revelations from God. "God spoke to me," they say, "and he told me this" or "God wants us to do *that*." And maybe he has! I don't want to put God in a box and deny that he can speak to us directly—but he hasn't promised to do so. His ordinary way of doing things is to speak to us in his written Word, the Bible. And so when someone claims to have a message from God, we must be very careful, like the noble Jews of Berea, to search the Scriptures and see if it's true (Acts 17:11).

So many voices clamor for our attention and demand our allegiance that it can be hard to know which ones to listen to and follow. And so John tells us not to believe everything we read or hear about God and spirituality. "Test the spirits," he says. Just because something is spiritual doesn't mean it's *good*. Just because Pastor Chris says it doesn't make it so—unless it lines up with Scripture. We need to weigh and pray whether or not the message comes from God, the devil, or own human pride. "...For many false prophets have gone out into the world."

But *how* do we test the spirits? How do we know if their message is from God or man, for good or evil? John gives us a basic litmus test to figure it out:

“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” (vv. 2-3).

How do you know if the message is from the Holy Spirit or an evil spirit? If the spirit confesses and believes that Jesus came “in the flesh,” it’s from God. If it denies Jesus, it’s not of God; in fact, it’s the spirit of antichrist!

A true Christian prophet, preacher, writer, or teacher will confess that Jesus came in the flesh. In other words, he or she will affirm that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, true God and true man. He “was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man; and was crucified for us also under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead...” (Nicene Creed). Basically, confessing Jesus Christ “in the flesh,” means believing all the teachings of Scripture about who Jesus is and what he did for us “in the flesh” for our salvation. In fact, whether or not someone is able to confess the Creeds is a pretty good examination!

But anyone who *denies* that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of the devil. If they reject the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and second coming of Christ, quite simply, they are *not* a Christian! They have the spirit of antichrist. Earlier in his letter, John tells us that “*many* antichrists have come...” (1 John 2:18). *Anyone* who denies Jesus Christ, his Word, or the salvation he won for us is antichrist—against Jesus.

Scripture clearly teaches that we are to reject false prophets and refuse to listen to them. In Romans, the apostle Paul writes, “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause

divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them” (Rom. 16:17). Our spiritual safety and eternal salvation are in jeopardy when we listen to the lies of evil men and women. Have nothing to do with them! But neither should we fear them, for as John writes...

“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” (v. 4). By faith in Christ, we have overcome the false prophets and deceivers of the world. Christ-in-us has conquered them! As Jesus said in the upper room, “...In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! *I* have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NIV). Christ overcame sin, death, and the power of the devil when he died for our sins and rose again to give us eternal life. Now his Holy Spirit dwells within us (1 John 3:24). He is not a spirit of fear, but a Spirit of *power*—and love (2 Tim. 1:7). And so we have nothing to fear of false prophets, so long as we keep listening to Jesus and *his* Word.

“They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them” (v. 5). A good liar will always be able to ensnare some people by his scheming words. Not everyone in the world wants to hear the Christian message. God’s Word often presents an inconvenient truth. It tells us things about ourselves we don’t always want to hear—that we are sinners, that God is angry about sin, and that we need Jesus to save us from God’s wrath. The world preaches tolerance, not truth. It is as the Bible warns us: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

The best way to gain an audience is to flatter people and pretend “I’m okay, you’re okay.” But if we don’t believe and trust in Jesus, we’re *not* okay! “For the gate is wide and the

way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt. 7:13-14).

John continues: *“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”* (v. 6). Only those who believe in Jesus and listen to *his* prophets, pastors, and teachers belong to God. Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life...” (John 14:6). Not everybody believes this, and most people don’t want to hear it. Pastors aren’t always popular people. Even in the church, we suffer from the syndrome of “shoot the messenger.” But the true believer listens to godly teachers and obeys the Word they preach: “Whoever knows God listens to us...” For it is not the preacher’s Word, but God’s Word on his lips, that saves us. And God will hold us accountable for the message we preach (Heb. 13:17; Jas. 3:1).

“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” (vv. 7-8). Suddenly, John surprises us by his mention of love. What’s love got to do with it? Is love important for sound doctrine and good teaching? Absolutely, yes! After all, people don’t care what you know until they know you care. “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). I am nothing without love. Sometimes in life it’s not so much what you say as *how* you say it. Loving words matter.

As Christians, we are called by God to stand up for Biblical truth—even in the public square. But we are also called to love one another. God *is* love. He loves every single person on this planet—including *you!* And when we love one another, we show God’s love and message are true.

But God's love is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling, or a bland message of tolerance—"Live, and let live." God's love is revealed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! As John writes: "*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*" (vv. 9-10). True love is willing to lay it on the line when it really counts. Most of us would probably be willing to take a bullet for our best friend, donate a kidney to one of our children, or jump in front of a bus to save our spouse's life. But we wouldn't do that for just *anyone*.

But God's love is different. Even while we were still "far off" (Eph. 2:13), while we were still his *enemies* (Rom. 5:10), God loved us and gave us his Son (John 3:16). "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Jesus talked a lot about God's love. But then he put his money where his mouth was and laid it on the line when he died on the cross for our sins. Jesus bought us back from the devil with "His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death" (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed). God sent Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice, the "propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10), who takes away our sins and makes us right with God. That's what Jesus came "in the flesh" to do for you and me (vv. 2 & 10).

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). That's "the Gospel in a nutshell," a message you can believe, a truth you can count on. God gives us his Son and his Word to save us from the lies of the world. As one loved by God and forgiven by Jesus, you are off-limits to the devil and his false prophets.

And so... *“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”* (v. 11). In the end, Christian teaching comes down to love: being loved by God, loving him, and loving others. Jesus came in the flesh to save us from our sins because God loves us. One of the best ways we can love our neighbors is to ensure they have the right teaching and the right God—Jesus Christ come “in the flesh.” “By this we know the Spirit of truth...” (1 John 4:6). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.