### Introduction

Good morning, church family. Today, we will continue to move through 1 John and into a portion of the text that helps clarify and bring together a few topics already touched on earlier in this chapter. You may recall that during the last few weeks the concept of testing is highlighted in several areas of 1 John. Yet in today’s message, we are not so much being tested ourselves, but rather administering a test to others.

For the message this morning, I hope to give you a sense of great hope. One of John’s main purposes in writing was to secure the assurance of his readers by showing them that they were in the truth.

### Review

Now in former sermons, Tim reviewed some of the issues related to this assurance. In summary, the apostle countered Docetism, a Gnostic heresy denying Jesus’ humanity, which was troubling churches in Asia Minor. In the earlier text, John writes to reassure believers, identifying defectors as antichrists and providing three tests to examine our authentic Christianity:

1. **Doctrinal**: Believing the apostolic gospel of Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection.
2. **Relational**: Showing practical love for fellow believers.
3. **Moral**: Obeying God’s commandments with delight. In 2:28–29, John urges abiding in Christ for confidence at His return, assuring that practicing righteousness proves one is born of God

But before we begin we need to know that today’s scripture, 1 John 4:1-6 is addressed from the Apostle John directly to presumed followers of Christ, who he addresses as “little children”.

This part of the gospel truth gives specific instruction for seasoned Christians as well as new believers. It truly provides a clear message to everyone who is meant to hear it by giving instruction, hope, peace, joy and assurance.

You see in our world, voices clamor for our attention...online sermons, social media posts, podcasts...all claiming to expand on some type of spiritual truth.

Even today, there are some extreme cases where people say they speak for God. Others offer feel-good spirituality or mix truth with error in ways that can mislead even the most sincere believer. How do we navigate this noise, not be rude and gullible[[1]](#footnote-1)? This passage is our guide, calling us to discern what comes from God and what doesn’t. The stakes couldn’t be higher...our beliefs shape our lives and our eternity. Let’s read it together:

"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. 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 already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is he who is in you 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." (1 John 4:1-6, ESV)

Often Bible publishers title this portion of the text as Testing the Spirits. These words are about discerning the spirits...or testing the messages we hear to ensure they align with God’s truth. The command 'do not believe every spirit' (v1) implies that John's readers might have been too quick to accept teachings. Or maybe they embraced claims of divine inspiration without questioning them."[[2]](#footnote-2)

It’s not about doubting everyone or rejecting every teacher, but about being wise, like a bank officer examining a note for authenticity. Counterfeit currency acts like a wildfire, damaging the original transaction and then spreading out of control until uncovered. Just as false teachings are eternally severe and can pull us from the gospel’s life-giving truth, while true teachings anchor us in Christ.

Today, we’ll unpack this passage and divide the message into three primary parts;

* the call to discern,
* the standards for discernment,
* and the assurance we have in Christ.

Many of us encounter theological concepts each week through radio, daily Scripture reading, and commentaries by longstanding preachers like John MacArthur, John Stott, Wayne Grudem, and others. These pastors and more have great information…others not so much.

Or solid teachers like these stray from the gospel message and temporarily introduce confusion. Some, by their very nature appear to be genuine. Like prophets who come in sheep's clothing but are actually wolves in Matthew 7:15.

John wrote to early Christians facing similar challenges...false teachers using spiritual language but distorting truths about Jesus. They were not necessarily overly successful but it was a real problem.[[3]](#footnote-3) Today, with endless information at our fingertips, the battle is even fiercer. Thus we need to equip ourselves to test every teaching, cling to truth, and walk boldly in Christ. Let’s begin with the call to discern.

### The Call to Discern

John starts with firm instruction:

“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.” (v. 1).

This isn’t a gentle suggestion...it’s a pastoral warning. Don’t swallow every spiritual claim, no matter how convincing the speaker or how polished the presentation. The world teems with false teaching...and many well meaning preachers spreading error. This may be why he refers to prophets and teachers as a “spirit”. It's a metonymy, or a figure of speech in which one object or idea takes the place of another with which it has a close association.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Picture the early church. Misleading teachers spread confusion by using familiar religious terms. For more on this refer back to Tim’s sermon which covered Gnosticism. Some claimed Jesus wasn’t truly human or fully divine, twisting core truths. John, at this point a seasoned apostle, writes to believers he calls “little children,” urging them to be discerning. Here, the word 'spirit' does not refer to ghosts but to teachings, ideas, or messages claiming divine inspiration.

But every message has a source– it's either the Holy Spirit or something else, like human ideas or darker influences. John’s not saying to suspect everyone, but to evaluate carefully, like a chef checking ingredients before serving a meal.

We know why this matters, wrong teachings aren’t harmless...they can be poison mislabeled as medicine. In Genesis 3:1-5, the serpent didn’t deny God; he twisted His words, which introduced doubt and confusion. “Did God really say?” he asked Eve, and then denied the consequences of sin. That’s still the enemy’s tactic: distort truth, create doubt, reject God’s Word. Scripture shows this pattern.

Look at Exodus 7:22,

“But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts. So Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.”

The Egyptian magicians mimicked the miracles performed by Moses’ in order to undermine God’s power.

This pattern continues in Deuteronomy 13:1-5,

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. 5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

Moses warned of teachers performing signs but leading to false gods, testing Israel’s loyalty. These weren’t always easily spotted...they seemed spiritual, or credible.

They don’t advertise their deception; they blend in, using spiritual sounding words and their message pulls people from truth. Notably, look at what Paul told the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28-30,

“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

Or consider that Peter cautioned that false teachers would quietly introduce “destructive heresies” (2 Pet. 2:1).

Or consider Galatians 1:8,

“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”

So anyone preaching a different gospel...even if it was an angel...should be rejected. The early church battled groups adding works to the gospel or denying Jesus’ nature. Some were sincere but misled, yet their message was eternally disastrous. This isn’t a minor issue or a temporary one...it’s been a constant threat.

Perhaps even more so today, technology amplifies this challenge. Pull up YouTube and you might hear a preacher promise wealth for donations. Scroll social media, and you’ll find Bible verses twisted to justify unbiblical lifestyles. Some churches just soften the gospel, really dodging sin, judgment and repentance to keep people comfortable, leaving them spiritually adrift.

Our culture often claims that truth is subjective—what feels true for you might not be for me. This mindset creeps into churches, prioritizing feelings over God’s Word. The call to discern is urgent because false teachings can lead to legalism, complacency, or rejecting the gospel.

Spoiler alert: We don’t just preach part of the gospel…you get the whole thing!

You see, discerning isn’t about being harsh or skeptical of everyone...it’s about being wise stewards of truth. You can see this modeled in Acts 17,

“The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

The Bereans didn’t accept Paul’s teaching blindly; they searched the Scriptures daily to verify it. That’s the parallel model here in 1 John. We don’t take everything at face value or dismiss it out of distrust. We test it.

Sometimes this evaluation can be quite hard.[[5]](#footnote-5) There are preachers who have the right personality to keep the attention of the congregation. They introduce an idea tainted by current events and end up diluting the distinguishing elements of scripture. When they are unable to persuade they yell, raise their voice, install pleading vocal characteristics or act in other emotional manners to fit the message into our worldly hearts.

But these false teachings can trap people in darkness…keeping them from Christ’s freedom (John 8:32). As a church family, we guard truth not just for ourselves but for others. John’s command is clear: don’t be naive. Test the spirits. Now, let’s see *how* with our second point...the standards for discernment.

### The Standards for Discernment

John gives us three clear standards to test the spirits: the affirmation of Christ, the signs of spiritual transformation, and commitment to God’s Word. These are like filters ensuring teachings align with God’s truth. Let’s explore each with practical application.

#### The Complete Affirmation of Christ

The first standard for discernment is the complete affirmation of Christ. Verses 2-3 say,

“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.”

What does the teacher or message say about Christ? Does it affirm that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? This isn’t just acknowledging a historical Jesus...it’s proclaiming Him as the eternal Son of God who became fully human to save us.

Not a trivial manner today, or in John’s day. Some denied Jesus’ divinity, calling Him a mere man with spiritual insight. Others claimed He only appeared human, believing physical matter was evil. Both errors undermine salvation:

In short;

* if Jesus isn’t fully God, He can’t atone for sin;
* if He isn’t fully human, He can’t represent us.[[6]](#footnote-6)

John insists that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh...the eternal Son, existing forever with the Father, entered history as a real man, born of a virgin, living sinlessly, dying on the cross, and rising again.

The phrase “has come in the flesh” is loaded. Has come in the flesh affirms His eternal divinity and incarnation. John has already declared this in 1 John 1:1-2,

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—.”

Further, in 1 John 2:22-23, he calls those who deny Jesus as the Christ liars opposing God. In 2 John 7, he warns against deceivers denying the incarnation. In 1 John 5:20, he states,

“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”

The truth is eternal, the test is also eternal. Question the teaching and perhaps the teacher. Does the teacher and the message fully confess Christ? Does it affirm His eternal divinity, incarnation, sinless life, atoning death, resurrection, and advocacy? If it redefines Jesus, it fails.

You see the word “confess” means proclaiming what the bible says. Theologically, the word "confess" in the Bible (primarily from the Greek term homologeō in the New Testament) carries a rich meaning rooted in agreement, acknowledgment, and declaration.

A true teacher exalts Jesus as the only Savior, urging trust in Him alone. If a teaching adds requirements or sidelines Christ with self-help or works for salvation, it’s not really affirming Him fully. For example, an online speaker might quote Scripture but call Jesus a guide for success, not our Savior. Once again, that fails the test. The affirmation of Christ is the first filter...does the teaching lift up Jesus as the God-Man who came to save?

This applies to us personally, the church family. Do our words and lives point to Jesus? When we share our faith, do people walk away knowing the King of Kings, or some watered down version of the faith? False teachers promote themselves or worldly values at Jesus’ expense. The spirit of truth exalts Christ; the spirit of error sidelines Him. Let’s ensure our witness magnifies Jesus alone.

#### The Signs of Spiritual Transformation

The second standard is the sign of spiritual transformation. Verse 4 says, “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world.” John encourages us, calling us “little children” to highlight our inclusion in God’s family. We’ve “overcome” false teachers...not by our own works or wisdom, but because the Holy Spirit in us is greater than worldly influences.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The elect have no grounds to boast about being born again as the order of salvation (ordo salutis) ensures that we are first made awake. Then when we trust Christ, God makes us His children, giving us a new heart and the Holy Spirit (as with Nicodemus in John 3). This Spirit changes us, sparking love for God, repentance from sin, and a hunger for truth. John says believers will overcome false teachers and messages because the Spirit protects us from deadly error.

While we might be confused on some issues, true believers won’t long embrace teachings which reject the gospel. The Spirit confirms truth, as Jesus promised in John 16:13;

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”

This standard applies to messages and the teacher too. Look at a teacher’s life: Do they show the Spirit’s work...love for God, repentance, bold interaction with the world, a commitment to Christ? A true teacher’s life is not perfect, but reflects the Spirit’s influence...grieved by sin, seeking holiness, pointing to Christ. False teachers chase worldly things for the wrong reasons.

Moving ahead in our text 1 John 4, verse 5 says,

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

Their priorities...fame, money, popularity...mirror the world’s values. It’s important not to take this too far. Wayne Grudem highlights that striving for certain luxuries and worldly gain is often right and noble. In fact, business can be run for the glory of God. The genuine test is if you have made the luxury your idol, or a means to appropriately expand the gospel in your life and the life of others.

As a practical consideration, think about those promising wealth and health, living extravagantly while seeking donations. Does that reflect a Spirit-changed heart or worldly gain? Or a leader supporting a lifestyle Scripture rejects (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Their lack of awareness suggests they’re not Spirit-led. A true believer’s life shows a struggle against sin, love for God’s Word, and desire to honor Christ. Galatians 5:22-23 lists the Spirit’s fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. True teachers exhibit these traits…imperfectly.

This applies to us, the church family. All of our lives should show the Spirit’s work, not highlight our own. When we sin, we feel convicted, not comfortable. When we hear the truth, we resonate with it, even if it challenges us. The Spirit gives an inner sense when something’s off, nudging us to check Scripture. Looking back at Jeremiah 17:9 remember, “The heart is deceitful above all things.”

This standard evaluates movements as well as individuals. Years ago, some churches focused on what nonbelievers wanted...less preaching, more entertainment. Using the brevity of the Sermon on the Mount and evidence from select historical figures, short sermons were in vogue. Highlighting the quality over quantity. This is not totally off base and shorter sermons are appropriate many times!

While some meant well, the extreme brevity weakened the gospel, prioritizing comfort over conviction. True believers crave teaching that exalts Christ and confronts sin. Ask: Does this teacher’s life reflect the Spirit’s work, or just the world’s priorities with a Christian label? As a community, let’s pursue lives marked by the Spirit’s fruit, showing the world Christ’s transforming power.

#### Commitment to God’s Word

The third standard is commitment to God’s Word. Our final verse 6 says,

“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.”

John refers to himself and the apostles, whose teachings are from the Spirit.[[8]](#footnote-8) Those who know God listen to apostolic teaching...or Scripture...because it’s God’s authoritative Word. Those who reject it show they’re not from God.

This standard evaluates a teacher’s relationship to the Bible...does it reflect a path of sanctification aligned with Scripture? True teachers anchor their message in the Scripture, letting it shape beliefs and actions. Some ignore scripture, reinterpret it to match cultural trends, or prioritize experiences. A claim that contradicts Scripture is a red flag...the Spirit doesn’t contradict Himself (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21).

In our culture, this is critical. It’s easier than ever to embrace cultural trends...like redefining family or morality...ignoring passages like 1 Corinthians 6:9-11… where our text says “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” Others prioritize feelings, saying, “It feels right,” despite contradicting Scripture. Scripture sets clear boundaries, and true guidance aligns with it.

The Bereans modeled this, we must do the same. Are we people of the Word, studying it diligently, praying for the Spirit’s guidance? Psalm 119:18,

 “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.”

As we immerse ourselves in Scripture the Spirit sharpens our discernment. The Reformation, called the church to Scripture alone (sola scriptura), and challenged unbiblical teachings, like earning salvation. New insights or reinterpreted scripture are used to align with culture, approving practices the Bible plainly rejects. In short, true teachers uphold the Bible, even when unpopular.

This guards against subjective spirituality. The Spirit leads through the Word, not apart from it. At First Baptist Nixa we commit to being a Word-saturated community, testing every teaching against the Bible’s unchanging truth.[[9]](#footnote-9)

### The Blessed Assurance in Christ

John closes this passage with assurance…“By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” Discerning the spirits can feel overwhelming in a world where truth is called relative. Everyone seems to have their own “truth,” and standing for biblical truth can feel lonely. But verse 4 offers a powerful promise: “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world.” We’re not alone...the Holy Spirit, stronger than any deceptive influence, lives in us.

This assurance has two pillars. First, we belong to God. John’s term “little children” reminds us we’re part of God’s family. Through faith in Christ, we’re born again, sealed by the Spirit (Eph. 1:13). This identity protects us from being swept away by falsehood. As mentioned earlier, theatrical teachers may be persuasive, but they can’t ultimately deceive God’s own. The Spirit confirms truth, as Jesus promised in John 16:13. In John 10:4-5, Jesus says His sheep know His voice and won’t follow a stranger.

Second, the Spirit’s power is unmatched. The enemy is strong, but the Holy Spirit is stronger, equipping us to discern truth, resist error, and stand firm. We’re not immune to mistakes...we can be confused on secondary issues, like church practices or current events. But on the gospel’s core...Jesus’ identity, His saving work, the path to salvation...the Spirit keeps us grounded. John says we’ve “overcome” false teachers...not because we’re brilliant, but because the Spirit’s power is greater. When a teaching denies Christ or twists the gospel, the Spirit prompts us and we turn to Scripture, like the Bereans.

This assurance fuels our daily mission. We guard truth not just for ourselves but for others. The truth sets free (John 8:32) and we model that for the world! As we discern, we become lights in a confused world, pointing to the true Jesus. This is both a privilege and a responsibility. We don’t need to be scholars...just faithful believers with an open Bible and reliance on the Spirit.[[10]](#footnote-10) Consider Jude 3,

“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

We speak of freedom in Christ, this assurance frees us from fear. The world may mock biblical truth as narrow; false teachers may seem powerful with lively followers. But the Spirit in us is greater, empowering us to stand firm, even when it’s costly and perhaps uncomfortable from a worldly standpoint. Early Christians faced persecution for truth; today, we might run into ridicule or pressure. The Spirit gives courage to proclaim Christ, knowing He’s won the victory (Col. 2:15). As a church family, let’s lean into this assurance, trusting the Spirit to guide us as we contend for the gospel together.

### Conclusion

Church family, this is a great wake-up. It's a good morning for us all. If you're a Christian this is a feel good message! If you're not a Christian right now…speak with one of our Pastor/Elders and make what's going on inside you right.

Our calling is to test every teaching...sermon, book, podcast, or conversation...against God’s truth.

We should ask:

* Does it affirm Jesus as the God-Man who came to save?
* Does the teacher’s life show the Spirit’s work?
* Does it submit to Scripture’s authority?

These standards aren’t about being critical...they’re about guarding the gospel that saves.

You see this is great news: we’re not alone. The Holy Spirit, stronger than any deception, lives in us, giving discernment, courage, and strength. So let’s be a Word-saturated community, discerning every spirit, lifting up Christ, and trusting the Spirit to guide us. We’ll protect our faith and shine truth for others, pointing to the Savior who sets them free. Like Nehemiah, let’s build our faith amid opposition, knowing God’s hand is upon us. Like James’ readers, let’s pray with confidence, trusting God’s promises. And like Paul in Galatians, let’s hold fast to the true gospel, never adding to Christ’s finished work.

Let’s pray. Father, thank You for Your Word and Spirit, guiding us into truth. We live in a deceptive world, help us discern teachings with wisdom and humility, clinging to Jesus Christ’s truth. Empower us by Your Spirit to recognize truth, live transformed lives, and share the gospel boldly. Make us a community that guards Your truth for Your glory and others’ good. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

#### Source Material References:The following bibliography lists key works by Reformed preachers and theologians that have shaped the theological insights, structural framework, and thematic emphases of the sermon, including its focus on Christ-centered discernment, the guiding role of the Holy Spirit, and the defense of biblical authority against error.

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* John Stott, The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 19 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).
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1. Colin G. Kruse, The Letters of John, 2nd ed., The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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4. John Calvin, Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles, trans. and ed. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1855), p.374 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert W. Yarbrough, 1-3 John, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brooke Foss Westcott, The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1886). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Stott, Letters of John - This ‘overcoming’ is not so much moral (as in 2:13–14, where the same word occurs) as intellectual. The false teachers have not succeeded in deceiving you. Not only have you tested them and found them wanting, but you have conquered them by decisively repudiating their teaching. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stott, Letters of John - This statement sounds the height of arrogance. So it would be if uttered by an individual Christian. No private believer could presume to say: ‘whoever knows God agrees with me; only those who are not from God disagree with me.’ But this is what John says. For he is writing in the name neither of himself nor of the church but of Christ, as one of his chosen apostles. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Charles H. Spurgeon, Spurgeon Commentary: 1 John, ed. Elliot Ritzema (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014) -

“A simpleton believes every word that he hears, but “the wise man’s eyes are in his head,” so he examines what he sees and hears, and does not blindly accept whatever may be told to him. This is an injunction of which there is great need in the present day, when so many accept anything that they hear from a “priest” or from a pastor without searching the Scriptures to see whether what they hear is in accordance with the inspired Word.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Stott, Letters of John [↑](#footnote-ref-10)