

Spiritual Scepticism

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[0 : 00] Do not believe every spirit, he says. Test the spirits to see whether they are of God.! But which might or might not be genuine.

Well, it may well include that, but I think what he goes on to say is that he has something more general than that in mind. Because he says these false prophets have gone out into the world. In other words, it seems to be their teaching, not just one particular statement or revelation, but the whole of their teaching that John has in mind here.

And that's what John wants us to reject. What spirits is he talking about? Well, he's talked about the spirit of murder in chapter 3, verse 12, when Cain killed his brother.

And certainly, don't we find much murder and violence around today dressed up in spiritual language? And if you think that only applies to Muslims, violent extremists can't hijack even Protestant Christian rhetoric, then remember Northern Ireland.

[1 : 28] Remember Rwanda, a genocide that followed a revival and should never have happened at all. It is possible for people even to dress up violence even in evangelical language.

But generally, in fact, I think the spirits John is concerned with are more subtle than that. They're spirits that deceive with smooth words rather than threatening violence.

That doesn't make them any less deadly, though. Jeremiah, the prophet, describes their message, Jeremiah 6, 14, They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.

They cry, Peace, peace, they say, when there is no peace. That's Jeremiah 6, 14. And the messages of the prosperity gospelers or those who preach an easy gospel without judgment or repentance or holiness, their message is no less deadly for being non-violent.

So, John has spent some time teaching us how to recognize the truth and so now he's going to spend some time teaching us how to reject what is false. And we need to apply these tests carefully.

[2 : 44] As I said, it's not just a matter of form of words. The devil can be a very convincing liar. But it's rather consistency with the whole counsel of God and the gospel message in particular.

So, let us examine what John is actually telling us here. I think we can say that John gives us five marks of the false prophet.

I put them on the handout there so as I go through you can have them all in front of you. So, he gives us five marks of the false prophet and then by way of comparison the marks of the true spirit and the genuine gospel.

So, we meet the fact that false prophets deny the Christ in verses 1 and 2. In verses 9 and 14 he talks about those who acknowledge the Christ.

In verse 5 he tells us that false prophets speak from the viewpoint of the world. In verse 14 he tells us the God's viewpoint. In verse 6 he says that the false prophets do not acknowledge the apostolic testimony but those in verse 14 those who are led by the spirit of God do acknowledge the apostolic testimony.

[4 : 02] Verse 7 to 9 false prophets do not display the love of God but in 16 and 17 the people of God do. False prophets do not have the life of God through the spirit.

He tells us that in verses 4 and 6 people of God do have the life of God through the spirit in verses 15 and 16. And then of course by way of conclusion he gives us this final comparison in verses 17 to 21.

If we do not love our brothers and sisters but claim to love God then we're liars. So false prophets do not love the people of God. So I'm going to expand on each of these a little bit more about what it means and what it says and then as I say it's a if you like a handy guide as to how to spot a false prophet but hopefully it won't be just that it will be an encouragement as to what is good and

healthy.

So the first thing John tells us is that false prophets deny the Christ in fact in verse 2 he says they deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

In chapter 2.22 he says that Jesus is they deny that Jesus is the Messiah but he's added this extra bit here come in the flesh. The Jews perhaps would deny that Jesus is the Christ but the Gnostics if we can use that term the Greek heretics deny that he's come in the flesh.

[5 : 42] Worldly skeptics today of course deny that he's come but here John packs the whole teaching about Jesus into one short phrase. So let's unpack it a bit.

Excuse me. Firstly then who is it that we're talking about? Well John just gives us his name Jesus but obviously he's referring to Jesus of Nazareth the historical figure who was born in Judea lived most of his life in Nazareth which is where he got the title Jesus of Nazareth.

Even today the most determined skeptics find it hard to deny that Jesus existed. There were plenty of witnesses and records that show that Jesus existed and the descriptions in the Gospels are in a thoroughly historical context.

Jesus of Nazareth that's who we're talking about. But secondly he says that Jesus is the Christ. What does that mean? Well the anointed king the Messiah. The anointed king in fact in the line of David. The one who was prophesied throughout the Jewish scriptures.

[6 : 57] David had been promised that there would always be a king in his house and Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy. It looked as though the house of David had fallen and died out but God's promise cannot be broken and Jesus fulfills that prophecy.

But it's here of course the disagreements start. Most people would agree that Jesus of Nazareth existed but is Jesus the Messiah? Many of the Jews came to the conclusion not.

They were expecting a political leader. They were expecting a military saviour one who would throw out the Roman occupation and reestablish the kingdom of David in Jerusalem.

But God didn't send that sort of a Messiah. Instead God sent a prophet and a saviour from sin. So is he the Messiah?

Is he the one who should come? Or as John the Baptist asked are you the one who should come or should we look for another? Yet all the signs that Jesus did and all the Old Testament scriptures point to the fact that Jesus is the Christ.

[8 : 08] Jesus is the Messiah. And yet your false prophet will do everything he can to deny this. And thirdly John tells us that he has come.

We can easily skip over that but verbs are important. He's come. The Greek word actually can mean he's arrived or it can mean he's appeared.

And different English translations use one or the other but it doesn't really make that much difference. The Christ was absent but has become present. He was hidden but he's now been made visible.

And just in case we have not quite got the point in verse 9 John clarifies this. He says God has sent his only son into the world.

And he repeats the same thing in verse 14 in case we missed it. The divine nature of Christ is hinted at here even if it's not stated explicitly. And although it's true that in fact in a sense Jesus has now left this world again the Christ has now left this world again and yet John uses the present tense.

[9 : 25] It emphasizes the change of status that Jesus the Christ has come to this world and now everything is different. Before that we would have looked at the world differently but now because in Charles Wesley's words our God contracted to a span incomprehensibly made man then we then the whole world is different.

And that leads us into our last point the last here that John makes he says that Jesus came in the flesh. Of course to the modern person that Jesus was a man is not too much of a problem but to the Greek idealists people followers of Plato and the other Greek philosophers the idea that God could be born and die a man was a hard one to take.

But Jesus if he was indeed the son of God should live and die seems incredible. And so someone came up with the theory that well okay Jesus certainly seemed to claim to be divine but perhaps the divine spirit of Christ came on Jesus at his baptism and rather crucially must have left him before his death because the immortal can't die but John was having none of that.

Jesus had a dual nature from birth and he died with his dual nature. God contracted to a span incomprehensibly made man Christ came in the flesh and the meat is almost as the more literal translation would be.

We're made of meat and Jesus was made of meat in that sense of dust made of the chemicals of this world and so was Christ.

[11 : 29] We're kind of used to this idea perhaps as Christians but we shouldn't forget what a remarkable claim it is. It is ultimately incomprehensibly that Jesus is made man.

So that's the first mark of a false prophet that they deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. And the second mark of a false prophet we find in verse five.

He says they are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world and the world listens to them. It's possible to produce versions of Christianity or things which claim to be Christianity which are more palatable to worldly taste.

And so the prosperity gospel presents it as a good way to get rich quick. Or it can be held out as a mere teaching of moral reform. Much liberal Christianity so-called is of not much more than that. That Jesus was an example and taught us to be nice to people. And you can do that if you do a bit of clever editing. If you remember that Jesus said love your neighbour do unto others as you want them to do to you.

[12 : 42] Well that sounds pretty attractive. But he also said the Lord also says be holy because I am holy says the Lord. So you have to leave that bit out if you want to make Christianity attractive to this world.

That doesn't go down so well. Well Christianity can be presented as some sort of sophisticated philosophy that titillates the mind. This is really what the Gnostics were trying to do.

They had some intellect, they claimed some intellectual insight or new understanding. Some sophisticated deep philosophy and revelation.

So it was a bit like Mensa. You're only allowed to join if you're clever. But that is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. The prosperity gospel ignores Jesus' warning to seek first the kingdom of God.

And if we really want to get rich we can do that without God's help. And human philosophy ignores the fact that the wisdom of God is wiser than the wisdom of man.

[13 : 57] Moral rearmament ignores the need for a saviour. As indeed our queen pointed out a Christmas before last God didn't send in her Christmas speech God didn't send a philosopher we need philosophers philosophers are good things to have but he sent a saviour.

If we can achieve moral reform on our own why did God send his son to be not just the teacher of the world but the saviour of the world the one who would save his people from their sins.

false prophets speak from the viewpoint of the world whereas the apostles speak from God's viewpoint. Which brings us again to the next point that false prophets do not acknowledge the apostolic testimony.

We find this in verse 6 we are from God whoever knows God listens to us but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. could debate whether by us here he means Christians generally or the apostles.

I think probably he actually means the apostles but it doesn't matter too much but what does matter is that it's the apostolic testimony the apostolic gospel that he's talking about because we all like to come up with something new don't we?

[15 : 19] I mean I spent my working life as an academic and there's one thing an academic really wants to do is to come up with a really new and original idea. I'm going to make your name as an academic and that's what you've got to do come up with a really original idea.

But the thing is we don't need a new gospel for each generation. In fact at the end of Revelation John warns against those who add to the apostolic teaching.

Now we do need to be a bit careful here. Of course there is progress in theology. Doctrines become better formulated and understood. I mean it took about 300 years before the church came up with even a halfway satisfactory definition of the Trinity, doctrine of the Trinity.

But that was because they were thinking and meditating about what the apostles had taught. They didn't invent a new doctrine. They understood better what it was, what the apostolic teaching was.

it's not the same as inventing new doctrines. Unfortunately the Roman Catholic church has a habit of doing. Because sometimes by inventing new doctrines you can undermine the fundamental ones.

[16 : 36] And so things like the worship of Mary really or the prayers to saints one has to say really undermines the apostolic teaching. That's to nullify God's law by the teachings of man.

In verse 14 John almost belabours the point. He says, we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world.

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him. There is only one God approved Saviour, so there is only one Gospel.

Not a popular view nowadays, surely all roads lead to God. But all those religious roads head in different directions, how can they all lead to the same place?

Well, I suppose on, well, let's not get into geometry here, but they don't. There was, there was, there were only a limited number of eyewitnesses to the Saviour.

[17 : 40] And so there were only a limited number that have a valid testimony Jesus had said to the apostles, the Spirit will bring them a knowledge of the truth. In the course of law, speculation isn't allowed.

Only those who have some kind of definite knowledge are permitted to be witnesses. Even an expert witness is only allowed to testify as to what they themselves have examined. mind. You can't go as, say, a psychiatrist into the witness and say, well, you know, I know about mental illness. I don't know whether this particular person is ill or not, but I can tell you about mental illness.

That's not, the psychiatrist has to have examined the person in question, or has to examine the DNA or whatever it is and say, I can testify that this piece of evidence is, you know, from my own knowledge is true.

And that's what John is saying here. The knowledge we have is the apostolic testimony and we shouldn't add to it. And if we want to add to it, we will land up rejecting it.

[18 : 50] The true witnesses were the apostles who saw Christ on earth. And then, of course, you can never keep, oops, sorry, that's not what I meant to do.

I missed one out, haven't I? I have missed one out.

Oh, no, that's right, sorry, yeah. Sorry, false prophets do not display the love of God. We find that in verses seven to nine. You can never keep John off the subject of love, of course. And if not surprisingly, he says, false prophets do not demonstrate the love of God.

It's characteristic, actually, of false religion, that it lacks love. The prosperity gospel lacks compassion for the poor. It's the gospel of I'm all right, Jack.

The philosophical forms of Christianity and religious liberalism despise the uneducated, and the unenlightened. And even a concern for moral reform generally leads, doesn't it, to a sort of cold fanaticism and it breeds hate, holier than thou, as we say.

[20 : 19] Dawkins recently accused all religious belief as opening the door to extremism. Well, you can see his point in a sense, although I might point out that atheism often does that as well.

And you've got to look at the Khmer Rouge or Joseph Stalin to see that. But true Christianity is the opposite of extremism in that sense.

John 3.16 says, For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. Jesus came to heal the sick, not those who had no need of a physician.

Jesus made friends with tax collectors, Roman collaborators, with uneducated workmen, with Roman patricians, the occupying force, even with madmen, and a dissolute Samaritan woman at a desert well.

God is love, John tells us, verse 16, and that love flows out via the sun to God's people, and then overflows into the world around.

[21 : 29] And anyone who fails to love his or her enemy is certainly no disciple of Jesus. However much religious rhetoric they may use to justify their behaviour, Jesus told us to love our enemies.

That's not always easy, enemies may remain enemies, but we will not display the sort of fanatical hate that we find so much of on our TV.

Oh dear, the hate on both sides in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The hate between different shades of Muslim. Christians have done that in the past, wars between Protestants and Catholics, and yet in doing that, they're not disciples of Jesus.

And certainly has to say that that was fairly short lived. It didn't take people long realised to realise that to kill in the name of Christ, to hate in the name of Christ, is a contradiction.

It can't be done. So our aim is always to seek reconciliation, to love our enemies, and if they refuse to love us, well, sometimes we may have to fight, but I don't think Jesus taught necessarily always pacifism, but nevertheless, he certainly taught that we shouldn't hate them.

[23 : 04] And next, false prophets don't have the love of God, the life of God through the Spirit. So in verse four and verse six, he says, 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.

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.

And he's talking here about God living in us. If you look at verse 15, he says, if anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

So this is perhaps a more subtle point, but it's an important one. Jesus taught, remember, that we have to be reborn to enter the kingdom. True religion is not a matter of outward obedience or even head knowledge, but of inner life.

The Jews should have realized that at the time and yet some of them didn't. Ezekiel had promised, Ezekiel 11, 19, I will give them one heart, as opposed to a split, divided heart.

[24 : 19] I will give them one heart, I will put a new spirit within you, and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh. To be a Christian is to live by the spirit, working out the life of God in the church and in the world.

If you have a heart transplant, then your improved health will show on the outside, no doubt. heart. But the important change is what's happened inside. And if you have a spiritual heart transplant, your inner life is renewed and set in a new direction, and certainly it ought to show on the outside, but the change is so fundamental that Jesus calls it a rebirth.

Unlike our natural life, God's life is eternal and indestructible. this was demonstrated by Jesus' resurrection. So how to spot a false prophet?

John makes the preacher's life easy because he always puts his own conclusion in. I don't have to think one up. And of course any conclusion that John comes up with is going to centre around the idea of love.

false prophets, they don't have the love of God, but they don't love the brothers and sisters. He's more specific here. Not that they don't show love generally, but they don't love God's people.

[25 : 56] As always, John comes back to love and this is his conclusion to this passage in verses 17 to 21. I think I will read it again.

In this way love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment.

The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says I love God yet hates his brother, he is a liar.

For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command, whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Well all you need is love, wrote Lennon and McCartney. But of course it's not true, is it? You do need food and you need shelter and you need family and transport and education and a whole host of other things.

[27 : 02] Yet there is a sense in which they're right because to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbour as ourselves, Jesus tells us, is all that the law of God requires.

But a love that is not based in Jesus Christ is false because in fact John calls it a lie, doesn't he, in verse 20. Anyone says I love God yet hates his brother, he is a liar.

John has told us to be sceptical, to reject any claim to love for God that does not meet the test of the truth found in Jesus, to reject any message that views things from the world's perspective, that tries to seduce us or threaten us into submission.

Our confidence is based in God's love, he tells us that in verses 18 and 19, there is no fear in love, perfect love, drives out fear. So we don't need to fear, but we do need to be careful on our guard.

Now what is God's command? Well, it's there isn't it? In verse 21, love me, love my people. That's what he says. That's the message God has for us.

[28 : 27] So let us make sure that we're not living a lie. The other. Thank you.