

# 1 John 4:1–6

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning and welcome to Holy Trinity Church on Palm Sunday when we reflect upon the Lord Jesus coming in the flesh and with all the humility in entrance into the city of Jerusalem.

A week where he would then lay down his life as a sacrifice and substitution for our own. Be buried and then on the third day rise to give newness of life and to confirm that he was indeed righteous while living.

That is, you know, the truth of the resurrection. The resurrection, more than indicating that he is God, indicates that in his life he was righteous.

Because death can hold no truly righteous person. And so, being vindicated in his righteousness, he now stands in God's presence and woos us to himself through faith.

[ 1 : 17 ] That we too might be righteous, although as filthy as rags. What a week. What a week.

We stand this Sunday and he is entering in all humility. By next Sunday, rising in all righteousness. By Ascension Sunday, sitting at the right hand. By that wonderful day when the Spirit comes at Pentecost, democratizing access to himself.

And now is your day of salvation before he returns. So what do you do when you come to church? Well, let me tell you what I used to do when I came to church growing up. I was what you would call a detached listener to the sermons. The church that I grew up in was an evangelical covenant church.

[ 2 : 24 ] It had an A-frame ceiling with, it looked like pine planks running from front to back. And when I would sit with my family, as I had to do, I would throw my eyes to the ceiling, contemplatively appearing as though I were paying attention to the sermon all the while trying to count the planks from beginning of the room to the end.

And they were so tight to one another that it would take all week and I would never get it done. And I could do that for weeks, months, years. Perhaps you sit with your family here today and while I'm preaching, your eyes are gazing and rather than roof-tying pieces, you're wondering how many rows there are of tiles from front to back.

And every week before I'm done, you've lost track and are unable to do it. I was a detached listener to sermons.

There are others, though, that are passive listeners. Their minds are actually embracing whatever comes and fine with whatever's heard.

They are receivers without any differentiation or distinction concerning what is entering into their mind.

[ 4 : 01 ] I mean, I've seen detached individuals with messages. I've seen passive individuals with messages. In fact, I've seen a lot of passive individuals receiving anything that comes before them on a movie screen, come out of the theater.

That was great. And I'm like, are you kidding me? That was sentimental nonsense. And they're like, well, really? That was all? You mean there was something in there I was supposed to be critically thinking about?

I was just receiving it all. Detached. Passive. Our text today is going to indicate that we are to be neither of those.

You and I need to acquire the ability to be active listeners. The story is told of a young woman who got engaged to a young man and then she learned over time that this young man was going to become a pastor.

I mean, nightmare of all nightmares. Engagement ring already on her finger. And she knew at that point that she was going to have to learn to like sermons because she was going to be listening to a lot of them.

[ 5 : 09 ] So this is how she did it. She said, first, I began to very much like the ending. Because it meant he had concluded.

We were done. And after a growing likeness for the ending of the message, and I know some of you are in that stage, she said, after that I began to get acquainted with and have an appreciation for the beginning.

Because once he had begun, I knew the ending would eventually arrive. And then she said, over time, not only did I grow to like the ending and the beginning, but all the bits in the middle began to emerge with a sense of beauty.

She learned how to be an active listener. So too with our text. This is a practical moment in the letter. This is a pastoral word on what you are to be doing while you're listening to sermons. Not only what you're to do, but why you're to do it. That's verses 1 to 3. And then verses 4 to 6, how to go about it.

[ 6 : 20 ] This is verse 1, What the author would have you doing while you're listening to me. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

That's what you're supposed to be doing. You're supposed to be testing that which you hear. Now the word really has a simplicity to it. You are to be making an informed judgment on what you heard.

You are to be, in another sense, having your own assessment of what is said. You think about the scriptures where it talks about you're to be tested as a deacon before you appoint a deacon.

Well, what does the test mean? It doesn't mean there's some written test. It doesn't mean that here's the things you do to grade them. It means make a judgment. Oh, in church?

I thought we were not supposed to judge anything. No, you are. You're supposed to be listening to make your own judgment on what is said. And it's concerning, in one sense, the content of what is being presented.

[ 7 : 39 ] This is an important point. I've spoken with people, even recently, this is very important. People who would say the Christian and the church should not waste its time critically, analytically defining the nuances of what is and is not said within the Christian community.

In fact, for them, spiritual churches leave all the assessments and judgments to God at the end. What the church ought to be doing now is just be busy with helping people. And just get on with something and leave the assessment to God.

God. This is a prevailing notion in our day. That's not what's done here.

It's the church's job. It's your job. Let me put it to you this way. There's some things you're supposed to let God do. There's some things God told you to do.

[ 9 : 02 ] Some things God's not going to do right now. And that is, make a value judgment on the words that are coming forth from the pulpit. He's actually handed that to you.

So don't sit there and imbibe the prevailing elixir of the day that says you, the congregant, are more spiritual if all you'll do is help someone rather than to think critically about what it is they're saying.

It's a wicked thing in play to take out of your hands what God has asked you to do.

That may be the most important thing said. I don't know. The Bible does not tell you just let God figure it out at the end.

No. Don't give this to God. He gave it to you. Test. Make an assessment.

[ 10 : 11 ] Make a value judgment on what you hear. That's what you're to be doing while you're listening to me. Why should you be doing it?

Verses 1 through 3, you're given two reasons. Four, many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God.

Every spirit that confesses 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.

Why are you to be assessing every sermon or message you hear? First, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. People claim to speak from God.

They do every day. Every pastor claims to speak for God. Put a collar on him or not, he claims to speak for God. And the serpent came in the early chapters of the scriptures.

[ 11 : 16 ] And the first question in the Bible, the first question actually required a preacher. The very first time there's a question in the Bible, it's this. Did God say? In other words, what did God say?

And at that moment, somebody has to fill in the blank. And people are filling in the blank all over the world today. And they're either rising above that clear, distinct Word of God, or they're falling below that Word of God in all its fullness.

I'll never forget when my children were little, after then-President Ford passed away and his service of memorial was in the great Episcopalian Chapel in Washington, D.C.

And the scripture was read from John 14. Don't be afraid or don't lose heart. I'm going to prepare a place for you. And it got right to verse 6, where Jesus, Behold, I am the way, the truth, and the life. And the pastor shut the Bible, and that was the end of the reading. And I yelled in my family room, No! Why? Because the verse goes on, And no one comes to the Father but through me.

[ 12 : 34 ] But he didn't want to embrace that. And he was speaking for God. And I was making my own assessment in my family room. I made my own judgment.

I'm not listening to him anymore. I'm not going to wait for God to tell me whether he's right or not. I'm not leaving this to God. He gave it to me. And that's what's happening.

See, there are many people who are speaking for God in this text who have gone out into the world. And then secondly, For many false spirits are empowering them.

Notice the language of these first three verses. It uses the language of spirit. It doesn't actually use the language of preacher, although I think you could possibly substitute that word for it. Don't believe every preacher.

But test those preachers to see whether they're from God. For many of those preachers are false preachers. And by this you know the Spirit of God. Every preacher that confesses Jesus Christ in the flesh is from God.

[ 13 : 39 ] And every preacher that does not confess Jesus is not from God. That preacher, he got the spirit of the Antichrist. I think it could almost be read like that by interpretation.

Not only are you to assess sermons because many false prophets have gone out, you're to assess them underneath it, underlying reason, for many false spirits are actually empowering them.

That's the nature of the word. More often than not, when you and I hear the word spirits, we use the term to speak of the disposition of someone. Right? Right? Oh, there's a wonderful spirit about him. Oh, she has a spunky spirit. I mean, that's the way we use it. But spirits can also be used to speak of the influences that empower someone.

Gonzaga. That team, that team had a spirit that just wouldn't quit. So you're talking about that which empowers someone.

[ 14 : 44 ] You think of it as, what's the spirit of the age? Oh, the spirit of the age at the turn of the 20th century was the spirit of innovation. Oh, now the spirit of the age is the spirit of technological advance.

It's the power. It's the engine underneath our time. Think of it in regard to alcohol. Why do they call alcohol spirits?

Because from the 12th century even to the 16th century, they began to realize that in the distillation process, when you began to distill it, it released. There was an elixir.

It released what? It released the power of the actual thing. And in the spiritual domain, that's what's going on here.

There is an animating life behind what is said concerning the Christian faith. There's a power released.

[ 15 : 50 ] So here it is. What are you to do when you come on Sundays? Don't count the tiles anymore. No disengaged listeners. Don't passively receive everything that's said.

Actively engage. Test what you hear. And you know the reasons why. Because there are a lot of bad preachers filling pulpits.

And they are empowered by spirits that are of the world or of God. Let me put it as simply as I can, one to three.

There are two reasons why you've got to pay attention rather than fall asleep in church. Because not all pastors convey the truth. And not all pastoral ministries are empowered by God. What to do? Why to do it? And then notice verses 4 to 6. There's going to be a movement here on how to do it. Two different ways to be testing that which you have heard.

[ 17 : 02 ] You can see the first one there in verse 3. Or 2 and 3. By this. You see that little phrase? By this you know? That's how you're going to know. You're going to see that phrase repeat itself down in verse 6.

By this we know. So there's going to be two ways, two things for you to know concerning what it is you're hearing. First, by this you know the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh is from God. And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. That's the first thing. How do you know? How do you make an assessment? Here it is. Simply put, by what the preachers have to say about Jesus. Pay attention to what people say to you about Jesus. He's the epicenter. It isn't that they have nothing to say about Jesus. It's what they have to say about Jesus. Now, let's look directly back through the historical lens of this letter. [18:11] Evidently, there were some preachers that were saying Jesus did not come in the flesh. That there was a teaching that actually began to destroy the phrase and he became man in the creed.

the humanity of Jesus, the bodily presence. He was a real person, flesh and bone. They would say, no, no, no, no. Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter whether he was real or not real. Irrelevant. What you got to pick up on is the spirit of Jesus, the semblance of Jesus, the ideas of Jesus. We're still hearing that today. Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter if he came in the flesh. Who cares? What you need to imbibe is that his ideas, his way, they would say he didn't come in the flesh.

Now, people have tried to situate this letter in history in the early church and to greater or lesser degrees we can see some of this even in the world outside of the scriptures around 150 or so, 150 years CE.

[19:20] What you have is a man by the name of Irenaeus and we actually have some of his writings as a church father and he writes a work called Against the Heretics and you realize he was battling an imminent preacher named Valentinus and Valentinus began to teach the thing called knowledge that there was a certain kind of way of knowing God and that knowing God had kind of a platonic sense to it that began to distinguish or separate out bifurcate the material world and the immaterial world the bodily world and the spiritual world and what you really were after was the material world the physical world was evil and stay away from and what you wanted to get into is the other and so Jesus then whether he became a person or not that might actually be a negative thing because he's connected to all this and all of a sudden you've got to have real gnosis you've got to have real knowledge you've got to have something else and he begins to write to attack these teachings now we have the record let me read a couple of paragraphs this is in

Irenaeus' Against the Heretics where he's confronting Valentinus chapter 8 concerning how the Valentinians pervert scriptures to support their own pious opinions quote such then is their system which neither the prophets announced nor the Lord taught nor the apostles delivered but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge they gather their views from other sources than the scriptures and to use a common proverb they strive to weave ropes of sand while they endeavor to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord the sayings of the prophets and the words of the apostles in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support so they're appealing to the scriptures they're appealing to something about Jesus but they've changed him this is going on always been going on it's not new today come on

Irenaeus has been on this thing a long time get to the library look him up he goes on by transferring passages and dressing them up anew and making one thing out of another they succeed in diluting many through their wicked art and adapting the oracles of the Lord to their opinions and then he gives an illustration beautiful given to me this last couple weeks by one of our classicists here just as if one when a beautiful image of a king had been constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces should rearrange the gems and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox and then should maintain and declare that this was the beautiful image of the king which the skillful artist constructed what a wonderful mid second century illustration of what was going on in the pulpits you have a construction of a beautiful image of a king made with precious stones and somebody takes all those elements deconstructs it and builds up one of their own liking and says this is really that this is Jesus when in actual fact it's the perversion of the Lord Jesus Christ into something like a dog or a fox it's what I tried to say a couple of weeks ago that the spirit of the age is to allow every individual to with Legos Legos build your own Jesus Irenaeus is saying you can't build your own Jesus the author here is saying I saw him I heard him I touched him I know him and what these other

preachers are telling you has nothing to do with him and you wonder well we don't have this image today this problem today that he didn't come in the flesh we got all kinds of people giving me an incarnational Jesus in fact it's the incarnational fleshly Jesus that we really like give me something with flesh and blood but in reality he's not the same in other words people all over are saying give me the Jesus that will make me happy that's what God promises me happiness and then they deconstruct the Jesus that says yes and you must be holy they'll say give me the Jesus that gives me success

I will dismantle any Jesus that calls me to suffering that's not my Jesus give me a Jesus that will conform to the street cred necessary to change the city of Chicago don't give me a Jesus that spiritually is trying to get something done on forgiveness of sins don't give me a Jesus that isn't going to talk about sin substitutionary atonement necessity of blood for my salvation archaic I'm not building that Jesus I only want blue Legos I don't need no red Legos right that's how you know what do they have to say about Jesus I want Jesus in all of the complexities you got to embrace the [ 25 : 19 ] Jesus that isn't the one of your own making if the Jesus you know always conforms to your ideas and never challenges your view in ways that necessitate change in your life then you ought to wonder whether you really got hold of Jesus and I ought to wonder too the Jesus of the scriptures is love and yet in second John we'll see later the Jesus of the scripture says don't invite that guy into your church to speak and then third John will say oh make sure you invite that guy to speak because they're doing the real thing really we're supposed to distinguish between people yeah isn't that God's job no that's not God's job that's your job so you gotta start reading the scriptures and say whatever the fullness of

Jesus is I'm in and wherever I'm most likely to jettison that Jesus that's probably an area of the heart that I need to repent of and sort out there it is first thing how do you do it how do you listen to sermons pay attention to what people say about Jesus now think of the irony because I can tell you what happens as soon as you walk out that door oh you go to Holy Trinity yeah what's the preacher like oh you know he's a good preacher he's a bad I don't care it doesn't matter to me I don't need your strokes but here's what I'm trying to say we don't assess people according to what they say about Jesus we assess preachers according to what we like about them oh the dude can communicate he's a communicator I mean he comes off the lectern he'll stand in front of the lectern you ever see me stand in front of this you ever see me put myself in front of this and this behind me go somewhere else and Bing and TJ do that go somewhere else actually you stay here because they won't be working much longer we assess we assess the wrong things we assess temperamental disposition we assess the ability to tell story we assess their personality we assess whether or not they let us into their home in the sense of does he talk about his children I wish he talked about his dog I don't have any dog to talk about and I never will have a dog to talk about and no cat and no goldfish either sit at my table there will be a bible next to it I gotta get back pay attention to what they say about Jesus notice verses 4 and 5 before going straight into the second way of how you assess preachers which he does at the end of verse 6 he pauses for a moment he's like a pastor here verse 4 he started out beloved verse 1 but now he turns the corner little children which are two ways of saying the same thing church congregation dear friends members he pauses for a pastoral moment not to have them assess the preacher but to make a pastoral comment and he encourages them with words concerning what he thinks about them so he's telling them you need to pay attention to what they say about

Jesus but for a moment let me pause let me tell you what I think about you little children you are from God you've overcome them for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world they're from the world they speak from the world the world listens to them we're from God and then he gets into the second thing fascinating you don't just pay attention to what they have to say about Jesus you pay attention to whether or not they are listening to the apostles that's the second test verse 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 by this you know you can make an assessment on the preaching and the preachers you're hearing by this one what do they say about Jesus two who are they listening to not what they're saying but who are they hearing this says they're listening to us now the we there and the us could be one of two things either the author and the apostolic band which you had back in the beginning of the letter that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you in other words a distinction between the author or authors and the recipients but also we or us could be the band the apostolic band and the

Christian community context is going to have to be the indicator for me it feels as though the weight falls on the apostolic band how do you know who to listen to not only what do they say about Jesus but in one sense and what are they saying about us about who about the eyewitnesses what are they saying about the apostolic message what are they saying about the faith that was passed down from the people who were there what are they saying about Paul well now let's get personal oh give me Jesus don't give me Paul I like Jesus I don't like Paul what do you say about John John says you don't love your brother you don't know God oh give me Jesus where everything's love no no the apostles actually begin to they know how to cut these dudes cut they separate they divide the apostolic band says not everyone's going to make it at the end oh that's how you know what do they think of the apostolic message what do they think of the

[ 32 : 18 ] New Testament what do they think of the record they pick and choose I I like I like this one here but that Jude thing no no no we'll lay him aside I like that we get saved judgment thing no no no I think the apostles at that time you see were inhabited by a worldview that would have not enabled them to see clearly beyond the enculturation of the ideas that were present within them and therefore what they're really conveying in a patriarchal tone it's the leftover hangover of the patriarchal age concerning gender or sexuality because they weren't really free from those things really really no full apostolic weight that's how you know that's how you know when I go to preaching workshops you know

I get asked a question a lot this question comes to me a lot who do you listen to who are you listening to who's on who's on your podcast podcast what do they call it podcast your Apple your iPad who's on those things that's what he's saying in the first century who are they listening to you'll know you'll know them by who they listen to the author was well aware that there was a wide variety of people out there that the preachers were downloading summary let me see let me show you these two together how do you listen to sermons pay attention to what I say about Jesus pay attention to whether or not I'm adhering to the fullness of the apostolic message pay attention to my speech pay attention to my ear every pastoral job performance review could be summed up in these two ideas you sought to sit down the leadership ought to sit down with the pastor and the elders that are elected by the congregation need to know two things tell us what you think about Jesus and tell us who you listen to and that that's the role of the congregation you need to be an active listener why because not all pastors broker the truth not all pastors are empowered by God and get this some pastors do for a while and then turn so never stop listening to what I say because I may turn

Lord kill me before that day but pastors turn every day every week somebody's turning well that little lady who married a pastor had to learn how to listen to sermons she liked the end it was done she learned like the beginning because it meant the end and over time she she benefited from all the things in the middle because it's those middle things that matter our heavenly father we now finish this day asking that we would be like like that city in the new testament in Berea where we are willing to search and inquire concerning the truthfulness of the proclamation we want you to speak to us that we would not be disengaged clearly that we would not merely be passive but active for the spirit of the age has entered the pulpit and the name and glory of your son rises or falls on it and that which was handed down to us is again put on the line in Christ's name amen