

Confidence to Combat False Teachers

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] Well, as you turn there, let me begin with a question. I wonder how well you listen. I know many of us blokes have selected hearing, as some of our children, but more specifically, how well do you listen to sermons?

Not just here at HTD, but wherever you hear them. Whether you're visiting another church or watching something online or even reading a devotional book.

I may have told you before, but when I was starting out as a minister in Sydney, I remember preaching when someone actually fell asleep. I was only a couple of minutes into the sermon, so I don't think I was that boring.

And it wouldn't have mattered so much, except that she was the organist who fell onto the keyboard. I wasn't sure if Bruce was going to do that.

And everyone's awake, aren't they? That's right. But how well do you listen? And by listen, I don't mean just stay awake, although that's helpful. I mean with the Bible open, testing what the preacher says against what God says in his word.

[1 : 13] Because that's what John wants us to do today. And we see it in verse 1, point 1. So just for those at home who may not have a Bible in front of them, actually, is that...

Oh no, verse 1. I must have put it in the wrong spot. That's all right. Follow along in the Bibles then. Dear friends, 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. Here John says there are many false prophets in the world. A prophet is someone, of course, who speaks God's word on God's behalf, like preachers and teachers do.

And he says there are many false ones out there, though. In John's day, you might remember, if we can go back to that slide, Tim, to chapter 2, he talks about those antichrists who deny that Jesus is the Christ.

And they are trying to lead people astray. They are the false prophets in John's day. But it's actually a constant warning in the Bible from almost every Bible writer.

[2 : 26] So from Jesus, who says to watch out for the false prophets because they come in sheep's clothing, to Paul, who says people will gather false prophets around them to tell them what they want to hear, to Peter, who says there'll be false prophets among you, to Jude, who says the same thing, and to John here today, it's a constant warning in Scripture because it's a constant, a clear and present danger in our world today.

But notice in verse 1 that John says to test every spirit because there are many false prophets. In other words, he seems to equate the spirit with the prophet here.

He'll do it again in verse 2 where he says every spirit by which he seems to mean every prophet. And why does he talk like this though? Well, because there is a spiritual realm in life, isn't there? And behind every prophet, there seems to be a spirit prompting them what to say, whether it's the truth or a lie. It's often characterized in cartoons like this, you know, the devil on one shoulder, the angel on the other, kind of prompting people, whispering in their ears and so on what to say.

And so in verse 2, it could be the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, who works in our conscience. Or verse 3, it could be the spirit of the Antichrist who is in the world.

[3 : 52] And so who is the biggest Antichrist there is in the world who lies and leads people astray? It's the devil, isn't it? And so John says, we're to test the spirits or the prophets to see which spirit actually stands behind them.

Is it the Holy Spirit from God? Or is it an Antichrist spirit from Satan? I remember when I was at my previous church, a yoga instructor came to me and wanted to hire our church where for some yoga classes.

And she knew I was a minister, so she started sharing her experience with God. And she said this, she said, oh, God told me to leave my husband and enter a relationship with this man at work because, and this was her reason, it wasn't domestic violence or anything like that.

She said, because I'd fallen out of love with my husband and God told me he wants me to be happy. Now, do you think that's the kind of reason God would actually give? Of course not.

And so it's not the spirit of God, is it? Telling her to do this. It's another spirit telling her to follow her desires. And so John says, test the spirits. Test what these prophets, preachers and teachers are saying to see which spirit stands behind them and to see if they're really from God or not.

[5 : 12] Because, verse one, there are many false prophets who are in the world. And to give us confidence that we can do this, that we can combat false prophets, that we can test them, John gives us some tests to use.

So point to verse two and three. He says, this is how you can recognize the spirit of God. Every spirit of the prophet that acknowledges Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

But every spirit or prophet that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist working in them, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

And so here is the first test. It's the Jesus test, isn't it? Do they acknowledge, that is, do they confess, believe in Jesus, that he is the Christ? Remember, you know that Christ is not his surname.

It's a title that means God's anointed king, the one who has a claim over our lives. John has already said back in chapter two that these false teachers have denied this.

[6 : 19] But here in chapter four, he amplifies it and adds, do they believe that Christ has come in the flesh? That is whether Christ became a real human in history and not just some angel or figment of our imagination.

And this is important for John and for us actually, because if Christ did not become human, he couldn't pay for our sins. Christmas had to happen before Easter.

You see, to exchange places with us, Jesus needed to be like us, human for human, to be fair trade. And because he was, then he could die in our place for our sins so that we can know God and life eternal.

And because he is the only one who did this, the only one who died for our sins as a human in our place, then he is the only way to know God and have life eternal.

And so it kind of matters that we believe Jesus is the Christ who came in the flesh, doesn't he? Last week, my son had the year 12 GATT test.

[7 : 34] I don't know if you've heard about this, but it's pretty important. It stands for the General Achievement Test and every VCE student does it. And it's pretty important because it helps determine your ATAR, your entrance into uni, if you are sick for a VCE exam and something doesn't go right.

But once you do the VC, once you get into your course or do an apprenticeship, the GATT test becomes irrelevant. It doesn't matter anymore.

But this Jesus test determines not our ATAR, but our eternity. And it remains relevant for us our whole lives until we reach eternity, doesn't it?

So it's a much more important test to get right, isn't it? And it also helps us here in John to determine the kind of spirit behind these teachers.

If these teachers do believe Jesus is the Christ who became man for us, then verse 2, the spirit behind them is the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 40] After all, the Holy Spirit's job is to point people to Jesus. But any teacher who does not acknowledge this verse 3, well, the spirit behind them is not from God, but the spirit of the Antichrist from Satan.

And so who are these teachers today? Well, they're teachers of other religions who deny some part of the gospel, aren't they? For example, Muslims say Jesus was a human prophet and I believe they hold him in high regard, but they deny that he is the Christ and they even deny that he was crucified for us on a cross.

Buddhists believe Jesus was a holy and enlightened man, but again, not the one who paid for our sins and the way to know God. Some time ago, I saw an article from a journalist from the Washington Post who claims Jesus didn't even exist in history.

It's a bit hard to see the subtitle, but it says, clearly there are good reasons to doubt Jesus' historical existence. existence. Clearly, really. Mind you, some even today deny the Holocaust ever happened.

But here is a false teacher behind whom the spirit of the Antichrist is leading people astray because the truth is there is plenty of good evidence. Here's another article from the Guardian a few years later and again, the subtitle is hard to read, but it says, there is a good deal of written evidence for Jesus' existence.

[10:09] confidence. Now, I doubt any of us would be fooled by this kind of false teaching, but sometimes false teaching can sound really convincing.

I mean, when I first showed you this journalist article, did you kind of went, ooh, ooh, maybe? What? Did it cause you to doubt for a moment? It can sound really convincing, like it must have sounded to John's readers, and so he not only gives them some tests, but some encouragement to have confidence.

So, point three, verse four. He writes, you, dear children, are from God and have overcome those false teachers because the one who is in you, the Holy Spirit, is greater than the one who is in the world.

John is saying, take heart, have confidence. You haven't been fooled by these false teachers. You've overcome them. For you do know the truth. You do believe Jesus is the Christ who became man for us.

And the reason we believe is because the Spirit of God is in us and he is greater than the Spirit of Satan trying to fool us. So, John's point here is that we can have confidence to combat these false teachers because we have the Spirit who is greater and we have already overcome them.

[11:31] It's kind of like what I was trying to show you a few weeks ago. Remember, I tried to be a bit of a false teacher and tell you that two plus two does not equal four. It equals five. I don't know if you remember that but you all looked at me as though I'd lost the plot.

In fact, someone called out, which school did you go to? That was you, Barry Joel. And Barry rightly did that because you had already been taught the truth, hadn't you?

By another teacher. You had already overcome my false teaching before I gave it to you. And it's the same thing here. The Spirit has already taught us the truth about Jesus. So, we've already overcome the false teaching that denies Christ.

We know the truth. And so, we can have confidence to keep combating these false teachers when they come our way. And we need this confidence because our society these days seems to say everyone is right, doesn't it?

You know, what's true for you is true for you. Everyone's right. Which doesn't make logical sense, actually. Because if, you know, person A is saying something different to person B, then how can they both be right?

[12:41] If religion A is saying something different to religion B, how can they both be right? What's more, our society also says we're not allowed to say anyone is wrong.

Are we? They've changed the definition of tolerance. It's being able to disagree with one another and defending and tolerating that we have different views.

That's what tolerance used to be. So now, you're not allowed to even disagree with each other. You're only allowed to say something if it's my view. But John gives us confidence not to fall for that, but to quietly recognize false teaching for what it is.

And if we need to speak up, then to do so gently, gently disagreeing with others because we know the truth, don't we? You've already overcome what's false and the one in you is greater than the one who's in the world.

But to give us even more confidence, John now moves to the second test, point four, verse five and six. He says, they, that is the false teachers or false prophets, are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world and the world listens to them.

[13:57] We are from God, John and the apostles, 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.

This second test is the listening test. In verse five, the false teachers are from the world, so they speak from the viewpoint of the world and the world listens to them.

And so to apply the test, you've kind of got to work backwards here. Firstly, is the world listening to this teacher? Are they listening because it shows that the teacher is speaking from the viewpoint of the world, saying what the world wants to hear?

And if that's the case, then that teacher is from the world, not from God. They're false. And let me give you an example. The world loves money, especially with the rising interest rates, again, the cost of food.

And later this month, I think it's the 29th of September, your petrol is going to go up by 22 cents. Woohoo! And so if I started preaching a series at Holy Trinity called God's Way to a Billion Bucks Now.

[15:13] Do you think we'd get more people from the world in our pews? I think we might. And they'd all listen to me because it's what they want to hear, isn't it? But that very fact shows I'm not speaking from God, I'm speaking from their viewpoint, what they want to hear, not what they need to hear, which in turn shows I'm from the world, not from God.

It shows I'm a false teacher like those false prophets in our first reading that speak from their own imaginations. Now, of course, we hope many from the world will listen to the gospel and become Christians.

We want that, don't we? And many do, but sadly not all will. Instead, most people don't want to hear about Jesus and so don't listen.

And so the test is, does the world listen to these teachers because they're speaking the viewpoint of the world? If yes, then they're false teachers.

That's the listening test, part A. But part B is in verse 6. John and the apostles, it says, they are from God. And whoever listens to them and they're teaching in the Bible, whether it's a person in the pew or a preacher in the pulpit, knows God.

[16:34] Jesus himself said, my sheep listen to my voice. And so if we listen to John and the apostles, then we know God.

We are one of Christ's sheep. And if a teacher listens to John and the apostles, then they know God and are from God. But whoever does not listen to them is not from God.

And so again, to apply the test, does the teacher listen to the apostles' eyewitness testimony in the Bible, in here? Do they teach according to the apostles' word?

If yes, then they're a true teacher who knows God. If no, they're a false teacher who does not know God. And has the spirit of falsehood behind them, you see.

That's how the test works. Now again, John is thinking particularly of those antichrists who deny that Jesus came in the flesh, and so they ignore John and the apostles' word about Jesus.

[17:33] They don't listen to John, which means they are false teachers. But that's only one group of teachers we see today. I think there are three groups of religious teachers. So I think there's the total false teachers who are not Christians.

I mean, how can you be? If you deny Jesus is the Christ, then you can't be a Christian, can you? So they're not Christians. And they claim to know God, but if they deny Jesus, it's not the God of the Bible, is it?

And so these total false teachers, they're not Christians, and they're totally misled by the spirit of falsehood. Now that's the first group, like teachers of other religions or atheists and so on.

And the second group are partial false teachers. they are probably Christians who do believe in Jesus, but they teach falsely in other areas.

They teach according to the viewpoint of the world, because they want the world to listen to them. And sadly, we find many of these in our churches, schools, and aged care centres even today.

[18:48] I was speaking with Helen Baxter, our partial care worker, who was visiting one aged care place a couple of weeks ago, and it's run by a church denomination. And the person she was visiting showed her a newsletter which had a chaplain's column in it.

But instead of encouraging them to read the Bible and so on, they were quoting some of Buddha's teaching to encourage them, along with some new age self-help stuff.

Now, is that true or false teaching? I'm sure this chaplain believes in Jesus, but they've fallen for this temptation. Now, don't get me wrong, they're all nice people, I've spoken to some of them myself.

I know they believe in Jesus, but they've been misled by the temptation to water down God's word, or to teach other stuff that's more acceptable to the world, so that the world might listen to them.

You see, they've been partially misled by the spirit of falsehood, so they're partial false teachers. And then there's the third group, the imperfect true teachers. They're Christians who not only believe in Jesus, but also listen to the apostle's word in the Bible and teach according to it.

[20 : 03] I'd like to think we've got this category here at Holy Trinity. And because we do teach according to the apostle's word, the world often ignores us or belittles us as being out of touch or bigoted.

In fact, I remember being laughed at for believing a part of the Bible, and the person laughing at me was sadly another Anglican minister. He couldn't believe that I would still believe this part of the New Testament.

And the irony was we were both at this minister's conference. people who were both at the time. But even though we do work hard here to teach according to the apostle's word in the New Testament, we are imperfect.

We sometimes get the details wrong because no one is perfect. I've made mistakes, Vijay made mistakes. We are imperfect, true teachers. And so because no one is perfect and there will always be false teachers, whether total or partial, then we all need to do what John says here.

we all need to test the spirits, test what the teacher says. And John is telling us we can have confidence to do that. He's given us these tests, for example, the Jesus test and the listening test.

[21 : 14] Plus he's told us that we have the spirit in us who's greater than the spirit who's in the world. And you have the apostles' eyewitness accounts collated nicely for you in this book.

And so you can combat false teaching. But it does require effort. It requires us to be active listeners, not passive pew sitters.

Because it is easy to lose concentration, isn't it? You know, to start counting the rafters. One, two, three, four. I know, I've sat in the pews before.

It is hard. It does require effort, doesn't it? To listen. But here's the thing, most things in life that are worthwhile require effort, don't they?

You know, family, even holidays require the effort of booking and planning. So, too, getting stuff from teaching. To get the most out of it requires the effort of listening, but to be active listens, not passive pew sitters.

[22 : 15] And listening with the Bible open, which helps you to concentrate anyway, actually.

Seeing if what the preacher says matches what God says as you read it. does this make sense? Oh, it kind of looks like it says something different.

Or, yes, it does make sense. It's why I always work through the text, so that you can check what I say, because God is more important than me or any other teacher.

And we need to be willing to ask questions if it doesn't make sense. Last week, someone emailed me a question about Psalm 19 that I spoke about, and it was fantastic. I love digging into God's Word, so that together we can hear what God says.

The big application is be active listeners, not passive pew-sitters. So, to finish, here's an active listening test for you. One of my kids was given some religious teaching a couple of months ago, and having spoken with this teacher, I believe that they're a Christian, they genuinely believe in Jesus, but John says to test, anyway, so this is what we did.

Here's the handout that my son was given, it was entitled Holy Habits, Sacred Ways, Spiritual Practices, and the idea was to encourage the kids to grow as Christians, but the first suggestion was to eat something raw.

[23 : 36] Okay, alright then? And then the next suggestion was stillness, stand in a tree pose, is what it says there, it's a bit hard to read. Now, is this the kind of spiritual practice the apostles give us in the New Testament?

To grow us? Well, let's keep going. The next suggestion was gestures, he says hold one hand, open in front of your belly, and the other hand up like a stop sign, this is a traditional Buddhist discipline.

Oh, okay. And then the first bullet point, ask the spirit, and then I've put in a scribble in my notes, which spirit are we talking about here? Now, Buddha may have general wisdom, wisdom, you know, other non-Christians can have great wisdom, but is this practice what the Bible says grows us in Christ?

Or the last slide, he says read some sacred texts, a psalm from the Bible, that's terrific, this is looking good, but then he adds a poem by Rumi, who's an Islamic poet.

Now, I'm sure his poems are beautiful and again may offer general wisdom, but are they the way that the apostles tell us to grow in Christ? And the teacher adds, don't overthink it, but Paul says, the apostle Paul says in Romans 12 that we're to be renewed by our minds, we're to think about it. [24 : 58] And so, having test this teaching, is it true or false? I know you don't want to say it, but what is it? It's false, yeah, we're taught not to say it, aren't we?

But it is false, isn't it? Now, I've met with this teacher over several hours, and gently spoken to them and heard them out and been in dialogue and I think we've made some progress.

But this is a real life example of what we're to do. Whenever we hear a talk or read a devotional book, whether a sermon here at HTD or a sermon elsewhere, we're to be active listeners, not passive pew sitters, checking to see if what we hear fits with what we read in God's word.

And you can do it. In fact, you just did it. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you for this somewhat simple message to test what we hear, but it's much easier said than done.

And so help us, we pray, by your spirit to test what we hear, to see if what we hear matches with what you say, so that we might always listen to you above all others.

[26 : 19] We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.