

1 John 4:1-6

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[0 : 00] And please turn in your Bibles to John's first letter, 1 John, which we'll find on page 1023 in the Church Bibles, chapter 4 of 1 John, and we'll be reading the first six verses.

We've made it through the sticky bits in chapter 3, which at least I wasn't able to get through, although they are of course very helpful verses, and now we move on to chapter 4, reading from verse 1 of chapter 4.

1. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God. For many false prophets have gone out into the world.

1. By this you know the spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

2. 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.

[1 : 27] 3. Little children, you are from God, and have overcome them. For he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

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. This is God's word. Well sometimes if you're particularly competitive, and you play a game or a match of some kind, sometimes you can win, but only just about.

And so even though you've won, afterwards you're actually quite shaken. Because you're aware of just how close you came to losing. I don't know if you watch Strictly Come Dancing, but when you watch the result shows, they'll announce who has made it through to the next round, and then there'll be the bottom two. And they'll do it in two halves.

So you've got half the contestants are out already, and you know one of the people in the bottom two. And then you've got half of them left. And as they narrow it down, then there's two left.

[2 : 55] And one of them is perfectly safe, because they were voted through. And one of them is not. One of them is just as safe as all the others who got through, but they just don't know it yet.

And so usually the last one to find out that they got through, instead of jumping and screaming like all the other couples, they just bowed their heads. They're just kind of relieved who got through.

That even though they were just as safe as they would have been, the fact that they were called last, they're just a bit shaken by it. They saw how close they came to not going through to the other end.

They realized that could have been a quite close call. Well, that's the kind of church that John is actually speaking to in this letter. They have come through a tough time, and they've overcome it. They've made it through. If you look in verse 4, they have overcome the trials that they went through. They've endured an attack from what you call some antichrists, some false teachers in the church.

[4 : 02] And those false teachers have now left them. But they're a bit shaken. They're not quite sure what to make of it. Maybe they're doubting whether they were right to stay.

Maybe they should have gone with these people. Maybe they were right all along. And of course, there's nothing to say that the same kind of threat won't come again to challenge this church.

So what John is doing, he is preparing them to keep going. He wants to assure them that they did the right thing. They were right to stay put. They were right to ignore this false teaching.

And he wants to help them to go on and to keep believing the truth. He's taught them some basic doctrines, doesn't he, at the beginning? Some basic teachings, basic principles for what they need to know to help them assess the truth.

He's urged this church to understand the time they live in and the world they live in. And that's sort of in this second section. He's helped them to realize that we live in a very selfish, materialistic world.

[5 : 11] But it is a world that is fading away. So that's the kind of world we live in. And we live in the last hour. He calls it the last hour when the full story has been revealed.

It's when God's truth stands. And it's been complete. As we heard this morning from Hebrews, in these last days God has spoken finally and climactically in his son.

And so where John uses the phrase here, the last hour, he means the same thing as the orisons of the Hebrew means when he says, these last days. It's the same thing. Last hour, last days.

And so this is the last hour when God's truth is fully revealed. We have the full message. But God's truth also stands opposed just for this last hour, before the end.

There will be opposition. And so having told them about what kind of world we live in and what kind of time we live in, he's focused now on, well, how should we live?

[6 : 19] In this kind of world? In this kind of last hour? And that's a key question to ask, isn't it? Francis Schaeffer wrote a book once and made a documentary series to go along with it, which I recommend.

And he is looking at the history of culture in the Western world. I think from the ancient Greeks all the way through the modern day, well, his time.

And he's trying to understand the world we live in. But the name of the book and the documentary is, how should we then live? It's not just to know what kind of world you live in. You need to know, well, then what does that mean for how we live?

And so it's a key question to ask. And so that is what John has moved on to. And so a key lesson he wants us to learn here, one key thing we need to do, and he's stated nice and clearly for us at the beginning in verse 1 of chapter 4.

Now, beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God. That is the lesson he wants them to learn.

[7 : 27] That is what you need to do in this materialistic world, in this last hour when the truth is opposed. Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits.

Then you might ask, well, what's all this about spirits? I don't really come across spirits that I'm aware of. And he explains nice and helpfully at the end of verse 1, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

He's talking about false prophets, false teachers. There's a lot of false teaching going around, as they well know. And so he needs to help them to discern.

There's been a lot of chatter in the world, I guess, the past year or two, hasn't there, about fake news and alternative facts and post-truth. But when it comes to the church, this is nothing new for us.

We have always been under attack by falsehood. There's always been false teaching. The church has always been in a position to need to be recognizing false teaching.

[8 : 36] So John is saying, don't believe every kind of teaching you hear. Be discerning and test it. Just because they use words you're familiar with, doesn't mean they're right.

And just because they use words you're not familiar with, doesn't necessarily mean they're wrong. You need to test the teaching. And the key question is, is this from God? If it's not, you should reject it.

But if it is, you should accept it. And as we ask our question, is this from God? The questions he asks here can also help us in assessing our own walk with the Lord.

We can assess the importance of what we need to look for in good truth, in good teaching. Does this square with how I'm living my life now? And so these are helpful diagnostic questions for us. Not just for false teachers. Or good teachers. But of course the question is then, well how would I know if it's from God or not? And I'm glad you asked.

[9 : 42] Because that is exactly what John's focus is here. So I've got seven per head on exactly that question. How would we know if the teaching I'm hearing is from God or not?

Well you need to consider three things. The first thing you need to consider in verses two to three. Consider their relationship with the truth. Consider their relationship with the truth.

Verses two and three. Some people like to sort of cynically describe people as having a casual relationship with the truth. Sort of a very thinly veiled accusation of someone being a complete liar.

But John here isn't, I'm not just saying truth in general. But John is speaking of specific truths. Or a particular truth that you need to assess them against. And that truth that you see in verse two. Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. That is a key point that you need to assess any teaching you hear against. And it's not just about was Jesus a human.

[10:46] That will be a key point. And they would have been hearing teaching around them that wanted maybe to deny that Jesus was human. Or maybe separating the human from the divine.

They lived in a world where there was lots of philosophy and thinking that wanted to deny the importance of the body. Which might sound foreign. But it is creeping back into our culture more and more these days.

When you listen to the transgender debate. What is actually happening is a diminishing of the importance of the body. And anything physical. And so it is important to say, no, Jesus did become human.

He did come in the flesh. He didn't say flesh is horrible and I don't want anything to do with it. I don't care about the flesh. He did come in the flesh.

But it needs more unpacking than that. It's saying more than that. But I think we're so used to some of the phraseology of it. Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

[11:47] John regularly referred to Jesus as Jesus Christ. Which for us sounds perfectly normal. And for them was pretty new. They would have known him as Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus son of Joseph. But Jesus Christ. If you just translate it to him. Jesus the Messiah. That is what that literally means. Jesus the anointed one of God. And so it's Jesus the Christ.

He's putting those two names together. Saying this is one person. Not just there was the man Jesus. And the divine Christ. As the false teachers they were hearing were probably saying.

But Jesus Christ is one person. And so key doctrines like this are really important to confess. And so if you're familiar maybe with our shorter catechism.

Who is the redeemer of God's elect? It is important to know that the only redeemer of God's elect. Is the Lord Jesus Christ. Who being the eternal son of God.

[12:46] Became man. And so was and continues to be. Both man and God. In two distinct natures. And one person forever.

If you hear someone. Teaching who does not believe. That Jesus. Is one person. With two natures. Forever.

Fully man. Fully God. That is game over. You have identified an antichrist. You have identified. The spirit of the one who opposes Jesus.

You have identified false teaching. And so actually learning the catechism. That I just quoted from. Can be really helpful. The shorter catechism.

It is a great way to arm yourself. Against false teaching. You are not immune. From believing false teaching. The IPC.

[13:43] Is not immune. Healing IPC. Is not immune. And so we need to be ready. To test the spirits. And so. It is good to learn.

Summaries of doctrine. By which we can test. The spirits that come. The prophets. And the teaching. That comes. A great tip. For learning that catechism.

Is some people. Are set it to music. And it is not. What you would come on. To kind of sit down. And listen to over an evening. But it is very helpful. As a memory aid. You kind of. Almost learn it by accident.

And so you can. You can look at plenty of. I know of at least two. People who have set the catechism. To music. So you listen to it. And after a few days. Of listening to it on repeat. You find that you have. Accidentally learned.

The shorter catechism. Or these bits of it. And that can be a great way. Of arming yourself. Against false teaching. So maybe. If you hear.

[14:38] The words doctrine. Or catechism. Or confession of faith. And you can just feel. A load of sense. Just coming out of your head. Then let me challenge you.

To reconsider. That position. At the very least. For your own safety. It is worth learning.

These basic truths. Not to say we all need. To become experts. But if you were. At Sunday school last week. We had Chad Mandix on. Teaching. And he kind of explained.

Well. Even if you're not. Going to become an expert. It's still good to have. Aspiration. To want to try and grow. In our understanding. Of the truth. Because there is always. More to know about God.

There is more to enjoy. About God. More to love. In God. And so. Why not commit ourselves. To knowing him. Better. And so.

[15:33] We need to consider. The relationship. Of these false teachers. With the truth. Specifically. This truth. About. The incarnate. Son of God. Jesus Christ. Has come.

In the flesh. And if they're teaching that. Then. There's a good sign. That they are a faithful teacher. Secondly. We need to consider.

Their relationship. With God's creation. In verses 4 and 5. Consider their relationship. With God's creation. And again. I mean that. In a very specific sense.

That John focuses. On two aspects. Of the creation. In particular. The church. That is a creation. Of God. And also. This fallen world.

He made the world. And we rebelled. And so it has fallen. And so. How do these false teachers. Relate to the church. He says. You are from God. And so. How do they relate to you.

[16:28] The church. And how do they relate to. The world. So verse 4. Little children. You are from God. And have overcome them. So.

So you have got through this attack. You have managed to survive. This difficult time. And the reason you could do that. Is because he who is in you. Is greater than he. Who is in the world.

Could be he who is in you. In each person. Or he who is among you. Within the church. That is greater than this. Spirit of teaching. That opposes Jesus. At every point.

Which is in the world. And so. And so. He's saying. This is how you won. This is how you became. Because the spirit was a work among you. You were truly a work of God.

You are a creation of God. Where the spirit of God is active. And then contrast the church. With the world. In verse 5. He's setting up this clear contrast. Between the church and the world.

[17:25] And so. While. You have God in your midst. What's. What are these false teachers like? Well. They're from the world. They speak from the world.

And the world listens to them. They have. Massively shrunken perspectives. Their concern. Is with this world. Not with the great God.

Who is in the midst of his church. But they just care about the here and now. The material things. Worldly things. And so.

Is their focus. More on the world. That is. Smaller than God. Or is their focus on the God. Who is greater than the world.

Who is bigger than the world. Look at how. How they relate. To the creation. Do they want. Do they care more about. The church. Where God is at work.

[18:21] Or do they care more about the world. Where they will be listened to. They will have a great audience. People will love to listen to them. Because they will say exactly what they want to hear. But.

Where is their focus. How do they relate. To these two key creations. The church. And the world. And then in verse six.

Consider their relationship. With the apostles. So. So he said. Little children. You are from God. And then verse six. He makes that distinction. We are from God.

And we have seen that. When he says we. In this letter. He usually means. We the apostles. And so. In the beginning. We proclaim these things. We write these things. And so.

His focus here. Is on. His authority. As an apostle. Now. The world would love. For you to think. That this world. Is sort of neutral.

[19:18] And blank. And bare. With sort of no. Inherent meaning in it. And so you can just. Choose the meaning. You want. And if you happen.

To choose. The teaching. That involves Jesus. And whatever the apostles. Said. And then good for you. Feel free to do that. Feel free to take that. In temptation. And then I'll go off. And pick my own.

But. We start off. With just nothing. And then you can pick. Your own meaning. Choose your own adventure. But. John is saying. No. They have genuine authority.

In this world. That it's not just. That the apostles. Are worth listening to. But. Here John is.

Demanding to be heard. That we.

Are from God. And whoever knows God. Listens to us. Whoever is not from God. Does not listen to us. This is how.

[20:14] Another test. We need to consider. Well how do they relate. To what the apostles.

Taught. Which we now have. Written in scripture. So how do they relate. To scripture. Even if you

say.

Well it's very nice. But no no. Do you relate to it. As something to which. You must submit. They have authority. They've been given authority. By Jesus. And so they. They're not just. Worth listening to. They must be listened to. Not just because. I like reading them. But they have. Genuine authority. In this.

New covenant age. Over all people. Everything they say. Is worth being listened to. Whether you're in this hall. Or just outside it. You are commanded.

To listen to them. If you've never. Read any of the New Testament. Before. You are expected. To listen. Not because we think. It's worth it. But because. It is genuinely.

[21 : 11] Authoritative. And a word from God. I was. Going in. Into the city. For a meeting. On Tuesday. I had a meeting.

With various churches. That also do lunchtime talks. And it was very encouraging. To meet many people. But as I was coming up. At a St. Paul station. I was given. This. A little flyer.

And it says. Oxford. Capacity analysis. I don't know if you've ever heard of that. I certainly haven't. A free. Personality test. In just one hour.

You can test. Ten key. Personality traits. That can. In italics. Determine your future success. In bold. And happiness. In bold. And find out.

How you can improve them. Give yourself. The knowledge. Of you. It says. It's for a limited time. That's what it says there. And then on the inside. It says. The OCA.

[22 : 04] Personality test. Has been taken by millions. Since 1960. And it was quite a limited time. And it says. Admit one. So this is a. A free ticket. To a free test.

That has been available. Since 1960. And then. Are you successful. Happy. Competent. Identify key areas. Of your personality. That need improvement. And learn how you could address them.

The test. And consultation. Are a free. Public service. With no further obligation required. Test takes up. One hour to complete. Etc. Etc. And you've got a graph. That when you look at it.

Is actually meaningless. And it'll help you with relationships. And communication. And compatibility. Whatever that means. And motivation. And financial security.

And fulfillment. Of lifelong goals. Oxford Capacity Analysis. Is a test developed. For the Church of Scientology. It has no connection. With the University of Oxford.

[22 : 58] And then. Where you can go and take the test. Is the Church of Scientology. Of course it is. And it's been. It's a registered trademark. This test. Of the Religious Technology Center. Which when you look it up.

Belongs to the Church. And it's used with permission. It's not kind of them. To give permission. To their own church. To use these names. It reminded me of exactly what. Chad was telling us last week. That cults hide.

And the Church proclaims. They are very open. When we give fires. It'll say. Ealing Lunchtime Talks. A 20 minute talk from the Bible. Hosted by Ealing International Presbyterian Church. But just see what they recommend.

They think it's worth you. Coming into their church. For success. And happiness. And motivation. Financial security.

Fulfillment of lifelong goals. So already they think that. The focus should be on the world. So that's the second test isn't it? Their focus is on what is in the world.

[23 : 59] Everything that is worldly. And you look on their website. And. After you dig around for a bit. You'll say. What does the church believe about?

Well it doesn't have a page. Just about Jesus. But Moses and Jesus and Mohammed. And other religious teachers. And says. Well you know. He was one of the great religious thinkers. Who passed on the light.

Jesus said. I am the light. But. And so they just think. He was just a man. Not Jesus. The anointed one of God. In the flesh. That's a clear fail.

On the second one. And then. On the last one as well. Because they're not listening. To what the apostles. Have authoritatively said. About Jesus. So that's a clear fail.

That's a clear test. Of current false teaching. That is in the world. That is opposing Jesus. It doesn't say here. That it's opposing Jesus. But that is precisely.

[24 : 55] What it's doing. It's incredibly dangerous. And it's worth knowing. Just from these key tests. I didn't need to look. Much further. All I had to do.

Was ask those three questions. And I can identify. Quite safely. These are not people. Worth listening to. And it's worth. As well. As I said earlier.
As a sort of. A self. Diagnosis test. Don't worry about. A free personality test. But think about. Our own walks. With the Lord. Do I display.
A commitment. To the truth. That is revealed. In scripture. In my life. Do I aspire. To get to know it better. Do I spend time.
Arming myself. Against false teaching. Preparing myself. For the day. When I will need. To combat it. And I will need. To discern. Do I display.
[25 : 50] A commitment. To the apostles teaching. And being. In a place. Where I will hear it. Faithfully taught. And we were hearing. On Wednesday. Won't we.

At the congregational meeting. How important it is. If ever you're moving. To a different house. Make sure that you're moving. Somewhere where there will be. A good church. Because otherwise. It will be disastrous for you. Don't. And if you can't find. A good church. Near where you will live. Don't move. That was. That was the key teaching.
And I think that. You know. You can just. Derive that clearly from here. You need to be committed. To the. The apostles teaching. Finding a good church. Will be. Key.
And a church. That teaches. These key things. Not just any old church. You can find. Plenty of churches. That no longer believe. Even that Jesus Christ. Has come in the flesh. If you've seen.
[26 : 45] A yes prime minister. There's that episode. Where the prime minister. Has to choose. A new bishop. And he's telling his wife. About the options. One of them. Is a rather progressive person.

Which is code for atheist. And. So his wife. Do they even. The virgin birth. Oh no. No. No. No. No. No. No. The resurrection of the body. Oh no. Nothing like that. There will be plenty of church. And. Obviously that's comedy. But it is a depressingly accurate. Description. Of how many churches. Are these days. Wanting a mix. Between those who believe in God. And those who don't. There is no room. For that kind of mix. There must not be any opposition. To Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ's church. And so.
Are we committed. To his word. And where it is taught. Faithfully. It's useful to think as well. How have I allowed my perspective. To shrink.
[27 : 41] Have I sort of developed. A sort of spiritual tunnel vision. Where I don't really focus. On anything that's bigger. Than the world I live in. And if I do.

It's not just a matter of. Well just stop it now. We need to think about. Why have I done that. What do I want. What am I looking for. What am I afraid of.
What am I afraid might happen. If I focus on anything else. But. There is a call here. For us to focus on. Greater reality. Than the world. That is lived out.
In the church. We meet God. Among the people. Of the church. The one who is greater. Than the world. Is among us. The church. The church.
His little children. And so we need to think about. Well have I let. That perspective. Shrink down. Well it's.
[28 : 38] Wonderfully kind of God. Isn't it. To have given us. These. These clear teachings. By this. We know the spirit of truth. And the spirit of error. And.

What a wonderful thing. The spirit of truth is. Wonderful good news. Of Jesus Christ. Who has come in the flesh. Not just so that. We could have a doctrinal test.
Of whether you believe. Jesus Christ came in the flesh. But why did he come in the flesh. For you and me. He came in the flesh. Because. We needed one.
To stand in our place. We needed one. Who would. Take the punishment. For what we. Have done wrong. And one who would.
Rise again. To new life. Representing us. And therefore. Promising. That we will. Rise with him. On the last day. The truth that we.
[29 : 33] Confess. And profess. Is a wonderful truth. Wonderful truth. For us to love. And enjoy. And for which we should. Thank God. And learn. And grow in.

And help each other. To grow in. So let us. Continue to do that. Let us help each other. To learn. And be ready. Not to believe every spirit.
But test the spirits. Whether they are from. The wonderful God. Whom we serve. And then when we find things. To be true. Let us thank God. For such wonderful truths.

Let's pray.