RECOGNIZE THE SPIRIT OF GOD

1 John 4:1–6

Key Verse: 4:2

“This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God…”

The Apostle John was like a spiritual father to the early believers. In this letter he often calls them his children. He wrote them this letter to prevent them from going the wrong way. It was so that they could continue in true fellowship with God the Father through Jesus his Son, and in true fellowship with one another. For this, they needed discernment, because there was a lot of false teaching coming from people who seemed good. In today’s brief passage John teaches how to recognize the Spirit of God, based mainly on what people are saying and teaching about Jesus. In this study we want to think about what is the right teaching about Jesus, what it means to “acknowledge” it, and why it’s so important. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

At the end of chapter 3 John wrote, “The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.” The Gnostics thought they had secret knowledge that only special people had. But everyone who repents of sin and believes in Jesus receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac2:38). It’s what it means to be a Christian. And as we continue to obey God’s commands, the Holy Spirit continues to live in us (Jn14:15,16). The Spirit dwelling within us helps us experience God’s presence in our lives, and God’s love (3:19; Ro5:5). Earlier in this letter John calls the gift of the Spirit an “anointing.” 2:20 reads, “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.” And 2:27 reads, “As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.” It means that the gift or anointing of the Holy Spirit helps us discern the truth. In fact, in verse 6 John calls him “the Spirit of truth” (cf. Jn14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

Read verse 1. Here John calls them “Dear friends.” In Greek the word for “friends” is “agapetoi.” It means those who’ve been loved with the great, self-sacrificing love of Jesus. John uses this word to introduce something important. He says not to believe every spirit. At first it sounds kind of strange. After all, who’s talking or listening to spirits? It sounds like a séance. But John is saying two things here: both that there *is* a spiritual world, and that people are speaking and teaching by a certain kind of *spirit*. We’ve already seen in our 1 John study that people can confess that Jesus is the Christ only by the Spirit of God (cf. 1Co12:3). But actually, whenever we’re speaking or teaching something, we’re actually being influenced or inspired by one kind of spirit or another. We’d like to claim that our words and thoughts are ours, and ours alone. But as human beings, we’re subject to the influence of invisible spirits. Ephesians 6:12 says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (cf. Ro8:38). These spirits are created spiritual beings living in rebellion against God, under the command of their leader the devil. They’re at work in human beings right now, trying to get us to disobey God (Eph2:2). As we live as Christians, John is saying we need to discern the spirit within a person, especially when that person is teaching or saying something.

Throughout the Bible God’s people are warned not to believe every spirit. Jeremiah 29:8 says, “Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have.’” It reminds us of Apostle Paul’s warning, “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2Ti4:3). In our sinful nature we don’t want to hear the truth. The truth hurts, and it challenges us to repent and change our ways. That’s why we’re all susceptible to being deceived. The Spirit who is from God is the Spirit of truth. But spirits not from God are deceiving spirits. So 1Timothy 4:1 reads, “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.” It’s not a fantasy; it’s a reality.

The last part of verse 1 says, “…because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” The verb “have gone out” gives the impression that these people are not just out there in the world but used to be in a Christian fellowship. Maybe that’s why they’re especially deceptive; they know some Christian truths. It’s a rather bleak picture that many false prophets have gone out into the world, and that deceptive spirits are empowering them. Why does John want us to realize this? It’s because we have to live in the real world where these false prophets live, and John doesn’t want us ever to be led astray (2:26; 3:7a). Some people seem to speak or teach on certain subjects with authority. But when they’re leading people away from Jesus, John calls them “false prophets.” He also says they’re influenced by “the spirit of the antichrist” who is in the world (3b; 2:18). He’s ultimately under the control of the devil, who really doesn’t want people to come to know the truth about Jesus. So John says in verse 1, “Test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”

How can we “test” the spirits? Let’s read verses 2–3. The real litmus test is what people are believing, saying and teaching about Jesus. And John focuses on a very specific teaching: whether or not Jesus Christ “has come in the flesh.” This means that Jesus was fully human. John mentioned it at the beginning of this letter: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life” (1:1). He described Jesus in a similar way in his Gospel: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn1:14a). An early Christian hymn described Jesus: “He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory” (1Ti3:16). The Gnostics, who held that the flesh was inherently evil and irredeemable, were teaching that Jesus wasn’t really fully human. But they hadn’t been there with Jesus. John the author *had been* with Jesus, and he wanted everybody to know that Jesus really *did* come in the flesh (cf. Jn19:32–37; 20:25–27).

So why is this truth about Jesus so important? And why did Jesus come “in the flesh”? The author of Hebrews explains: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death…For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (2:14,15,17). 1 John 2:2 says “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Read verse 2 again. A key word in this verse is the word “acknowledges.” What does it mean? It doesn’t mean to just believe a dogmatic, theological truth. And it doesn’t mean to just mindlessly repeat the same words others told us. No, to “acknowledge” in Greek means to confess. To confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh means to truly accept his atoning sacrifice personally. Apostle Paul wrote: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1Ti1:15). If we don’t know what sinners we are, it’s not possible to acknowledge Jesus Christ and why he came. We need to fully accept what sinners we are, and that Jesus came in the flesh to save us. When we do, we are born of God and truly join in Christian fellowship (Jn1:12,13).

John has already written about acknowledging Jesus in this way. In 1:7–9 he said, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” To acknowledge Jesus means an ongoing walking in his light, confessing our sins and accepting his shed blood to purify us. To acknowledge him is to keep on depending on his shed blood to be forgiven, cleansed and purified, so that we can truly serve God (Heb9:14). If we’re trying to do it on our own, with our own righteous deeds, if we’re avoiding confessing or dealing with our sins, we can’t really acknowledge Jesus, and we’re actually trying to serve God to glorify ourselves. As we’ve seen, to acknowledge the truth that Jesus came in the flesh to save us from our sins, we need the Holy Spirit (1Co12:3). Jesus said: “When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment… when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth…He will glorify me, because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you” (Jn16:8,13,14). Let’s read verse 3 again. John says that those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus as our atoning sacrifice have actually been deceived by the spirit of the antichrist. The world we live in doesn’t acknowledge the reality of sin. People think they’re good, right, or victims, and God is wrong. More and more people don’t want to lay responsibility for sin on individuals, but on society. It’s deceptive, and many fall for it.

John goes on to encourage his readers. Read verse 4. Those who are from God are born of God (3:10). And the one who is in us is God himself (4:12,13,15). The one who is in the world is the evil one, the devil (5:19; Jn12:31). It’s kind of scary to think that in this real world the devil is roaming around deceiving people, and that we’re no match for him. But John gives us a great assurance. The one who is in us, God the Spirit, is greater than the one who is in the world, the devil. Not through our own strength or smartness, but through the Spirit, God keeps us safe and gives us spiritual discernment.

Now let’s read verses 5,6. Here John makes a sharp contrast between the world and true Christians. The viewpoint of the world is basically the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (2:16). This viewpoint lures people to love money, pleasure and themselves and their own pride. But the Spirit of God guides us to love God, love people and understand spiritual things. People who love money, pleasure and their pride won’t listen to true Christians. But those in whom God is working will listen. What are they listening to? It’s not random advice; it’s the message about Jesus: that Jesus has come in the flesh to save people from their sins.

Let’s read verse 2 again. As we live in this confusing and deceptive world, we need to recognize the Spirit of God. We need to listen to those who are teaching God’s truth. We need to let the Spirit of God convict us of our sin and lead us humbly to Jesus, who died and shed his blood for us. We need to have confidence that the Spirit of God is in us, and that he’s greater than this evil world. And instead of looking at people with our own prejudices, assumptions and expectations, we need to learn to recognize the Spirit of God working in people to draw them closer to Jesus.